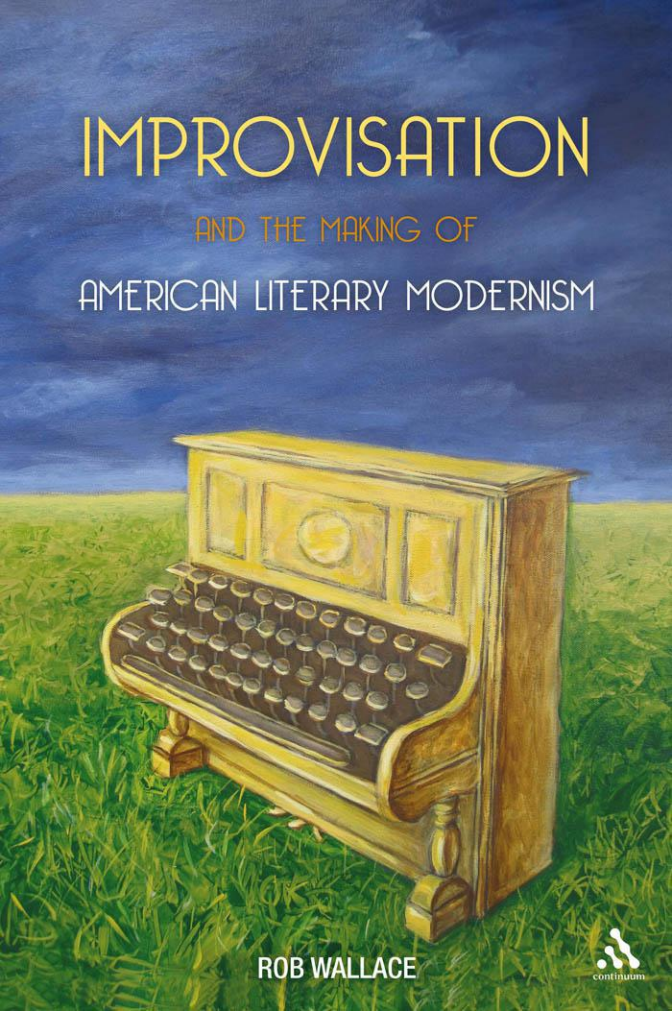
IMPROVISATION

AND THE MAKING OF

AMERICAN LITERARY MODERNISM



ROB WALLACE

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Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism

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Rob Wallace

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* * *

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Introduction

Writing Improvisation into Modernism

If one can stop looking at the past and start listening to it, one might hear echoes of a new conversation; then the task of the critic would be to lead speakers and listeners unaware of each other's existence to talk to one another. The job of the critic would be to maintain the ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that sense of surprise to other people, because a life infused with surprise is better than a life that is not.

Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces

Jazz is the sound of surprise.

Whitney Balliett

"Improvisation," wrote guitarist Derek Bailey in 1975, "enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood."[1] Over 30 years later this is arguably still the case.[2] Defining and discussing improvisation in a *literary* context is an equally, if not more challenging task. If it seems odd to open a book about American literature with a quotation from a British free-improviser like Bailey, then chock it up to the surprising energies that jazz, and improvisation in general, has generated throughout the last one hundred years or so.[3] Perhaps Bailey's words are a another way of saying, "if you have to ask, you'll never understand," an answer attributed to Louis Armstrong when asked to explain his music.[4] Yet like Bailey, who, after all, proceeded to write a book and make a television mini-series about improvisation, I nevertheless keep asking, and this book provides some possible answers to questions about why improvisation might be important to modernist literature.

While this book is not, strictly speaking, about jazz, it aims to define a certain kind of improvisational practice and theory that is significantly linked to and influenced by jazz, as well as demonstrating that improvisation is more central to modernist literature—scripted, seemingly fixed texts—than is usually thought. The questions and answers herein are also necessarily biased by my own active life as a musician and sometime poet, trying to make sense of why and how I do what I do. I find modernist texts interesting, and I think that one reason they interest me is that they have something to do with improvisation. That "something" is what the rest of this book will attempt to analyze.

Today there is a growing body of work which we might call the cultural studies of improvisation; or, to use the formulation that is also the title of an on-line journal started in 2004 devoted to these issues, critical improvisation studies.[5] It is not "jazz studies" or "jazz criticism," even though it has been

significantly influenced by those fields. But neither is it "literary criticism," musicology, ethnomusicology, or any other standard discipline. Concurrent with this development in improvisation studies, modernist studies has developed a more nuanced set of questions and critical tools, also drawing on cultural studies, critical race theory, gender and sexuality studies, and new approaches to historical and aesthetic periodization. This book presents a study of literary modernism from the vantage point of this new interdisciplinary world.

Despite the recent critical work on improvisation per se, as well as greater attention to the complex relationships between black and white artists in the modernist period, there remains a dearth of scholarship specifically discussing *improvisation* in modernist literature. My goal is to highlight the improvisational characteristics in the work of four modernist poets—Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens—who are rarely (with the exception of Langston Hughes) discussed in relation to improvisation. Put another way, I argue that each of these poets used improvisation in their work. Moreover, each of these writers had significant and complex relationships with the most important source of improvisational practice and theory in the Americas: African-American culture and the musical forms which would eventually be called jazz.

My argument represents not merely a critical "rereading" of these poets, but also a corrective to the misunderstanding of—or, more often, a complete lack of attention towards—improvisation as an area of focus in literary criticism dealing with modernism. Reading these poets in light of improvisational theory and practice provides a richer context for appreciating their work and demonstrates the importance of improvisation more generally in modernism.

While improvisation, in almost any sense of the word, is by no means unique to America, it nevertheless took a unique turn with the advent of jazz. However, jazz—or musical improvisation in general—is not the sole example of American improvisational practice, nor does it represent the only kind of improvisational influence on the poets discussed below. Yet jazz is the most common art form associated with improvisation, and its presence is crucial to understanding the context of improvisation across the board in American culture. This *musical* development held important consequences for the larger *artistic*, *cultural*, and *political* life of America as a whole (and, eventually, the world). In aesthetic history, constant change, novelty, and renewal are hallmarks of the modernist period in particular, summed up by Ezra Pound's translation of the Chinese credo "renew it every day."[6] Although earlier strands of American philosophy and art put a premium on what might be called improvisational practices—such as Emerson's urge to create a new American literature, which Whitman later sought to make real—American modernism is the period when improvisational practice and theory began to make a significant impact on art and culture.[7]

Faced with the vicissitudes of modernity, improvisation became an increasingly important tool for making art, because it could itself change and adapt.

Paul Gilroy has noted that for African-American improvisers, this skill was not a luxury to indulge in but a necessary ability, developed out of a "counter-culture of modernity" which used what it had at hand to critique modernity from within.[8] Stripped of their legal and political rights, African Americans and other oppressed peoples in the Americas drew on already extant traditions of improvisation within their own communities while at the same time fusing these traditions with new ways of thinking and being in the Americas. Thus improvisation took on a new meaning in American life in general, which subsequently influenced global culture.

Modernisms

Before going further, it will be necessary to clarify some terms, working backwards through the words in my title. To paraphrase Ezra Pound in *ABC of Reading*, there will be a longish slog through some definitions that I think are nonetheless important for my discussions of the poets throughout the rest of the book.

First, let me take up briefly the issue of modernism. I have limited the scope of my analysis to writers from the United States of America who came to prominence in the period roughly from 1900–1950. In some sense this is an arbitrary cutoff point, especially since Hughes, Pound, and Stevens all lived past 1950. Yet the bulk of work on improvisation, jazz, and literature, has been done on writers of later generations, specifically those involved with the Beat and Black Arts movements.

Part of the impetus behind this book is the dearth of critical work discussing improvisation and literature in earlier periods. I intend to demonstrate the deep cultural roots of the kinds of issues that later movements took up, and to show that the genealogy of improvisation in American literature stretches farther back than is usually thought. My focus on modernism also stems from a belief that the predilections of modernist writers still have bearing on contemporary culture.[9] I don't particularly have an ax to grind with proponents of post-modernism as a period or theoretical concept, but I do think a continued focus on modernism has shown us just how complex and far-reaching its various ideas are.

In fact, it might be said that with the hindsight of the shakeups brought on by post-modernism, we can now, in the twenty-first century, finally begin to see the full range of *modernisms* which branched off into all manner of "posts"—or twigs, trees, flowers, and bushes. As Marjorie Perloff assessed these issues, writing near the turn of the millennium: "As we come to the end of the century, it is the variety of modernisms that strikes us; indeed, the 'totalization' often attributed to modernism belongs much less to the literature of modernism than to its theorists."[10] Thus, like many of the terms used in this book, I use the word "modernism" as a strategic essentialism, recognizing the wealth of diversity inherent in that supposedly monolithic category.

Some of the most important projects in modernist criticism from the last few decades have been those which both investigate the work of non-Anglo or artists operating "below" the "high modernist" discourse, and at the same time deal with the complex connections between disparate artists and seemingly disparate modernisms, "high" and "low" alike. In American literature studies in particular, articulating the DuBoisian "problem of the color line" and how this problem affected modernism has been a particularly important area of critical discourse. Rather than focusing primarily on the oppressed Others of modernism—despite the importance of this initial critical move—or arguing for an essential separateness of, for example, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, critics have started to analyze the dynamics of interrelated modernisms.[11] Not only do such projects provide a corrective to various critical and political mistakes based on an Anglo-centric historicization of modernism, they also show us the limitations of essentialist thinking, be it in terms of race, literary period, nationality, or other categories.

One of the most compelling of these studies that takes such a perspective is Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. Douglas argues that early twentieth-century American culture assumes a special place in modernism as a whole:

> From the start the nation has had a tangible and unique mission concocted of unlimited natural resources, theological obsessions, a multiracial and polyglot population, and unparalleled incentives and opportunities for democratization and pluralism that culminated in the early modern era in the development of the media, all initially based in New York. Those media have for seventy-odd years now provided much of the world, for good and bad, with its common language.[12]

Douglas is not arguing here in favor of the kind of American exceptionalism which, in its more jingoistic forms has resulted in the various disasters of U.S. foreign and domestic policies (slavery, the near extermination of Native Americans, or various imperial wars from the Spanish-American War to the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). Her belief in the importance of American cultural forms does not lie in the fact that those forms are better than others, or somehow divinely sanctioned. Yet there *is* a unique character to the cultural constructs of the United States—due to geographic, religious, demographic, and other reasons—which demands a critical focus.

From a slightly different, more skeptical angle we might say that what makes America unique is its continuing failure to live up to its own self-proclaimed exceptional democratic ideals. Despite legal and social attempts to regulate racial and class boundaries, America has created cultural forms deeply informed by the mixed-up nature of its "mongrel" people, to use Paul Gilroy's and Douglas's phrase.[13] The modernist period, with its technological inventions allowing for even more complicated and faster communication between people and ideas, and with the accompanying massive restructuring

of societies due to urbanization, war, and other social factors, displays disparate reactions to the mongrel nature of America.

Born out of an already multiplicitous social and aesthetic climate, then, American artists are not unique because they possess a unified, essential American identity. The term "American" itself belies the diversity, complexity, and contradictions of the more than 500-year mongrelizing process of the place and idea of "America." And, as ethnic studies and borderland studies have reminded us, "America" in its conventional use by people from the United States represents a small fraction of the cultural and geographical scope of the *Americas*.[14] My limited focus on writers from the United States of America should thus be viewed provisionally. To fully represent the range of what constitutes "American" literature or "American" improvisation would be well beyond the scope of this book. My use of the term "American" thus carries multiple connotations. I do believe, following from Douglas, that there is a historical and geographical specificity to the Americanness which all of the poets under discussion are influenced by. But I also believe that this Americanness is itself the result of a multiplicity that cannot be contained by borders, ethnic or racial divisions, or aesthetic categorization. The tension lurking within the term American itself thus ignites a significant amount of the modernist which fueled the work of these writers.

I employ a similar strategic essentialism in my use of terms like "black" and "white" throughout this book. The variety of ethnic and other groups which have contributed to American and modernist culture notwithstanding, I have focused for the most part on relationships between black and white culture. Each of these monolithic labels holds a wealth of internal variety and complexity, proving again that essentialist labels are a bad match for lived experience. Yet due to the histories of legally sanctioned essentialism starting with slavery, the consequences of the realities of these labels still live with us. As Paul Gilroy states in *The Black Atlantic,* the persistent double consciousness of African diasporic peoples is a sign of how "At present, they remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their cultural Manichean dynamic—black and white."[15] By analyzing the complicated terrain of this Manichean dynamic, and how it was actually navigated by black and white modernists, we can hopefully learn from the mistakes of the past while at the same time reclaim a richer understanding of the nuances of cross- and-inter-cultural exchange.

The diversity within the group of poets viewed here is indicative of the variety of contradictory and complicated versions of Americanness. What becomes clear from this sort of perspective on modernism is that it demands an analysis of the interaction between multiple subject positions—both in a biographical sense and as expressed in the speech-acts of the work—rather than defining these subject positions as discrete, isolated, essential categories. As Arjun Appadurai has noted of the processes of globalization, "we will need to ask not how these complex, overlapping, fractal shapes constitute a simple,

stable (even if large-scale) system, but to ask what its dynamics are."[16] One of the central dynamics of the latent globalization in modernism, as I discuss in this book, is improvisation.

Grouping my four poets under the sign of "American modernism" does not, I hope, reinforce the essentialist categories I wish to break way from. In fact, by foregrounding the provisional nature of improvisation itself, I hope to show how these writers themselves were engaged in the constant negotiation of categories such as America and modernism. Pound and Hughes, for example, show two very different ways of critiquing Americanness from within, as it were. Their extremely different political attitudes, brought on by their very different subject-positions, were nevertheless united in an attempt to revise that idea of America which was always being re-imagined.

Since its creation in the minds of Europeans, "America" has been an idea struggling to reconcile itself with a real place, and the "invention of America" was and continues to be an aesthetic, philosophical, and often physically tumultuous act of grand proportions.[17] From multiple Americanisms come multiple modernisms. Even expatriate writers and artists who carried their Americanness abroad and were transformed by their new environments sometimes found the uniqueness of their American experience confirmed by contrast. It was not that America was better, but that the geographical, philosophical, and aesthetic setting for American artists did produce something unique, as James Baldwin described most precisely in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American."[18] In many ways, the failure of American idealism was what drove the improvisational spirit, transforming the rags to riches myth into ragtime reality.

Improvisations

To discuss improvisation in a literary context we must define what it is, what it involves, and what is at stake when improvising. To answer these questions we have to look at the relationship between music, writing, orality, and performance. I should emphasize that my own definitions, like my subject matter, must be provisional. While I do argue that all of the poets under discussion here are engaged in similar kinds of improvisation, I also want to assert that each artist and each creative act implies a situational definition of improvisation; each kind of improvisation, while sharing certain features, will be different because each instance of the creative process is itself bound by time—the clock cannot be turned backwards. From moment to moment things change, and improvisation implies a heightened attention to this fact.

That being said, improvisation is a notoriously difficult word to accurately define.[19] One of the most recent significant studies of jazz improvisation, ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation,* includes almost 900 pages of musical examples and text in an attempt to

explain what improvisation consists of. By the end, Berliner settles on an essentially two-part definition: 1) Jazz (and by extension, improvisation) is a way of life, and 2) Improvisation is like speaking a language. He states:

> It is not surprising, therefore, that improvisers use metaphors of language in discussing their art form. The same complex mix of elements and processes coexists for improvisers as for skilled language practitioners; the learning, the absorption, and utilization of linguistic conventions conspire in the mind of the writer or speaker—or, in the case of the jazz improvisation, the player—to create a living work.[20]

While the "music-as-language"/"musician-as-speaker-and-writer" metaphors have their limits, the way in which jazz and language so conveniently and frequently mix in the minds of musicians and commentators is part of the origin of my research into the connections between improvisation and literary modernism. As I will detail later, the linguistic features which writers both use and transgress, as well as the cognitive space they often attempt to represent, are strikingly analogous to improvisational practice precisely because they are examples of the same kinds of work that happens during an improvisation. Just how far the analogy can be pushed is not only a matter for critical insight, but a procedure that the poets themselves were often engaged in.

Improvisation, as I use it, is best understood in relation to a constellation of terms: spontaneity, metaphor (in the Greek sense of "carrying over")—hence, metamorphosis—risk-taking, recreating, theme and variation, the ability to change within a structure of rules which is itself constantly changing; bricolage.[21] In its most *basic* form, improvisation involves the reshuffling, revising, and recreation of information, using pre-existing materials to make something new. Improvisation is *not*, as it is sometimes perceived, completely free, or "doing whatever you feel like," although it strives for new and less restricted avenues of expression than the current set of rules can accommodate—a process often involving intuitive and even rash decisions. It requires skill and training, it can be learned, and it can fail horribly, precisely *because* there are tacit rules within the community of improvisers.

Since the structures and rules within which improvisation is enacted are *themselves* constantly changing, the best improvisers are often those who can break the rules in a way that makes everyone else want to follow them into new territory. In this way, even in the collective improvisation of a jazz group, the individual voice always remains important, as does the relationship between an improviser and an audience (a feature further emphasized by the "conversation" metaphor which Berliner and other scholars have focused on). Improvisation is action that occurs as the result of planning and memorization but does not depend on these plans, and it demands some sort of novelty and uniqueness every time. It has aesthetic and practical advantages and disadvantages: it can surprise but can also alienate; it can "work" in the sense that it allows the improviser to accomplish a given task, or it can fail and be a bad improvisation.

While a particular instance of improvisation can be judged aesthetically as bad or good, depending on the rules governing the improvisational situation, improvisation as a practice is not inherently "good" or "bad." Yet it has acquired variously pejorative or positive connotations depending on who is defining it. One of the most interesting perspectives on improvisation from a literary perspective is Stephen Greenblatt's "Improvisation and Power." Interestingly, Greenblatt's example of improvisation involves a role reversal regarding the usual agents of "negative" improvisation. The history of American race-relations has typically resulted in labeling improvisation as a characteristic of primitive, non-cerebral, animalistic behavior, due to the fact that the most prevalent American improvisers were black jazz musicians. Greenblatt, on the other hand, focusing on Iago's use of improvisational techniques in *Othello*, connects improvisation with the figure of the con man, the liar, and implies that improvisation served as the principal tool of European imperialism.[22]

This connection between improvisation and trickery is also a deeply American archetype, summed up best by P. T. Barnum's maxim, "there's a sucker born every minute." The ability to outwit someone without their knowing you're outwitting them requires skillful improvisation. But there is another variation to the con-man trickster figure in American culture, ranging from various Native American incarnations of Coyote to the West-African-derived "signifyin(g) monkey."[23] The trickster in African-American culture, while retaining the ambiguous nature of potential thief or con-artist, also embodies a survival technique in the face of oppression. Thus Ralph Ellison would connect the con-artist with the storyteller in his preface to *Invisible Man:*

> I knew that I was composing a work of fiction, a work of literary art and one that would allow me to take advantage of the novel's capacity for telling the truth while actually telling a "lie," which is the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story. Having worked in barbershops where that form of oral art flourished, I knew that I could draw upon the rich culture of the folk tale as well as that of the novel, and that being uncertain of my skill I would have to improvise upon my materials in the manner of a jazz musician.[24]

This concept of a trickster storyteller, capable of jiving his or her audience while at the same time delivering some kind of moral lesson underlies one version of "positive" improvisation. Such a trickster is tricky because life has been unfair, and the only way in which to deal with fate is to test one's luck by audaciously facing it down.[25]

Another version of the potential ethical benefits of improvisation has been developed recently in the work of critical improvisation studies scholars. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, for example, point out that while many kinds of improvisation are not necessarily radical or anti-hegemonic, "we could argue there to be an identifiable and radical form of improvisational practices in which concepts of alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization

of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue are in evidence and worthy of the kind of attention they get in this book."[26]

The book referred to here, riffing on a phrase by jazz luminary Sun Ra, is titled *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. This book represents both a continuation of an older tradition of privileging improvisation as an ethical practice as well as a revision of that tradition. Whereas writers in the line of Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and others have mapped out important areas of improvisational activity in American culture and how that activity has helped oppressed peoples survive, the newer generation of critical improvisation scholars in general are even more open to the potential benefits of improvisational practice, even as they view cultural practice in general from a cautious viewpoint informed by post-structuralism, ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, and leftist political theory.[27]

Among Fischlin and Heble's claims for the potential ethical and political use of improvisation are the notions that ". . . improvisation, in some profound sense, intensifies humanity . . . by intensifying acts of communication, by demanding that the choices that go into building communities be confronted" and that ". . . improvised music making offers a resonant model for the marriage of theory and practice."[28]

The utopian themes developed here are analogous to the utopian goals dispersed throughout modernism, including the dreams of revising American idealism into American reality. In this way jazz and improvisation become important to a specifically American context. Whether or not improvisation can actually accomplish the laudable goals of community building, stimulating critical practice and social transformation, or otherwise "intensifying humanity" is open for debate, and the authors discussed in this book display a variety of attitudes towards the potential ethical dimensions of improvisation. As in W. H. Auden's ambivalent maxim that "poetry makes nothing happen," the political and social effects of artistic improvisation are hard to detect, depending on what's being looked for. But generally speaking, as should be evident in this excursus on the problems of defining improvisation, to improvise is an act not limited to the realm of artistic production, and therefore it can be viewed, as theorist and improviser George Lewis has stated, as "an everyday practice."[29]

This blossoming out of improvisation as a totalizing process, an activity that can encompass not only the nightclub stage but a walk in the park or the negotiations between lovers could possibly lead us to a critical dead end. That is, if *everything* involves improvisation, what is particularly useful about talking about improvisation in the arts?[30] Haven't we lost the specificity of its utility? I think that we instead begin to see that improvisation, and what we will—again, provisionally—call its opposite, composition, are two sides of a continuous spectrum of possibilities in any action in time.[31] The implications of this are that some amount of composition and some amount of improvisation occur in most activities, including writing, reading, and thinking. Yet for

the purposes of this study, the specificity and importance of improvisation as a practice lies—beyond its usefulness in a given day-to-day situation—in the fact that it still maintains a deep historical connection to cultures of opposition.

As Fischlin and Heble recount, some of the earliest dictionary definitions of improvisation link the word to the histories of oppression that it remains associated with to this day:

> . . . one of the earliest recorded uses of the word "improvisation" in English in 1811 . . . associates it with "the flexibility of Italian and Spanish languages . . . [which] renders these countries distinguished for the talent of improvisation" . . . A slightly earlier use of the term "improvisator" (for improviser) occurs in 1795 and explicitly links extemporaneous verbal dexterity with music: "The Italian improvisator never attempts a ballad without striking his mandolino" . . . Curiously, these early usages of improvisation cognates enact their own ethnic othering in which the consistent association between improvisatory discourse and Latin/Mediterranean cultures are implicitly opposed to Anglo-Saxon culture.[32]

If Fischlin and Heble here seem to be reading a dastardly design into what appear to be innocuous statements about Italian and Spanish improvising poets (they also take aim at Greenblatt's article discussed above) then consider that they are reading these definitions against the wider context of improvisation. Set against the European Enlightenment ideals of logic, structure, and reason, the possible benefits of improvisation seem to ring hollow. As Philip Pastras recounts in his survey of improvisation, the Southern European *improvissatore* was often viewed skeptically, like a negative version of the con-man. The improviser's skill with words and music was merely a mask for his deviousness and transient nature.[33]

What started as a cautious commentary on the spontaneous nature of Southern European poet-singers turned into at best a dismissal of African-American cultural forms, and at worst, outright racism as improvisation became connected with jazz. Jazz historiography reveals many striking examples of these two poles of opinion. For example, in a 1917 *New York Sun* article by a commentator named Walter Kingsley states that "The highly gifted jazz artist can get away with five beats where there were but two before. Of course, beside the thirty-seconds scored for the tympani in some of the modern Russian music, this doesn't seem so intricate . . . "[34] Note how Kingsley opines that jazz music doesn't sound complicated compared to "modern Russian music," by which he most likely means Stravinsky's *Le Sacre Du Printemps*, famous for its rhythmic complexity (ironically, Stravinsky was significantly inspired by jazz). A 1918 editorial in *The New Orleans Times Picayune*—the paper of record from the city often cited as the birthplace of jazz—proclaims:

> Prominently, in the basement hall of rhythm, is found rag-time, and of those most devoted to the cult of the displaced accent there has developed a brotherhood of

> those who, devoid of harmonic and even of melodic instinct, love to fairly wallow in noise. On certain natures, sound loud and meaningless has an exciting, almost intoxicating effect, like crude colors and strong perfumes, the sight of flesh or the sadic pleasure in blood.[35]

Jazz on the one hand represents an analogous, if not as "intricate" version of modern Western Art Music, and on the other hand, jazz is a sexualized expression of pure rhythm. The racial connotations here connect to a long history of African-American stereotyping: blacks as unsophisticated, instinctual, crude, violent, and sexual. While *jazz* might have become more disconnected from such early critiques, these two poles of expression—that jazz is musical (as opposed to noise), but not as sophisticated as European art music, or that it is imbued with negative sexual and violent impulses—are essentially where African-American musical expression still stands today in relation to Euro-American music, as contemporary debates surrounding hip-hop demonstrate.[36]

Afrological and Eurological Improvisations

Despite the racist attitudes towards jazz and other forms of African-American-derived improvisational practice, jazz has had a widespread impact and influence on American and global culture. As the poets in this book themselves demonstrate, black cultural forms were too ubiquitous to ignore and often provided very attractive alternatives to Anglo-European aesthetics. Yet the widespread racist connotations of *improvisation*, via its connection to jazz, have led to a lingering and sometimes subconscious negative view of the word improvisation itself. Composer, theorist, and improvising trombonist George Lewis has traced the development of two different traditions in American musical practice, which he dubs "Afrological" and "Eurological."[37]

Each of these traditions represents important aesthetic achievements, and Lewis is careful not to racially essentialize: "My constructions make no attempt," he says, "to delineate ethnicity or race, although they are designed to ensure that the reality of the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group must be faced squarely and honestly."[38] In other words, as Lewis states, "African-American music, like any music, can be performed by a person of any 'race' without losing its character as historically Afrological."[39] Yet what Lewis shows in his account of these two traditions is that Eurological musicians and composers have often tried to discount or disavow the validity—and in some cases their direct relationships to—Afrological improvisation and to improvisation as a term. Instead of defining their musical practices as "improvisation," Eurological composers, most notably John Cage, used words like "experimental," "indeterminacy," "aleatory," or "chance." Lewis quotes fellow composer and improviser Anthony Braxton, who presents

the argument in stronger terms: "Both aleatory and indeterminism are words which have been coined . . . to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility [on American music]."[40]

Despite Cage's claims regarding the relationship between his work and Zen, the *I Ching*, and other "Eastern" influences, Lewis asserts that the historical predominance of jazz is directly related to Cage's own procedures of indeterminacy. Lewis points out that bebop in particular, a major turning point in jazz history (and a significant influence on jazz in literature) was created several years prior to Cage's more radical techniques.[41] Lewis is not suggesting that jazz is the sole influence on Cage, but he is arguing that Cage's caginess regarding improvisational techniques originating in African-American cultural forms is indicative of a wider trend of discounting black improvisation and privileging so-called avant-garde or experimental practices, as if those practices were created in a vacuum of Eurological trial-and-error.

The problem that Lewis and other critics have located then, is not that there are different kinds of improvisation or different trends in musical practice, some of which are more associated with white culture and some more with black culture; the problem is that those very separations are set up from the beginning to be antagonistic towards one another because of the longer histories of racism related to improvisation. This also creates, as Lewis and other black composers have noted, a double-bind for African-American musicians who are interested in creating Eurological music: they are simultaneously viewed with suspicion by their black jazz peers and the white-dominated world of "composed" music. This dilemma reminds us of a central misunderstanding about improvisation: that it contains no elements of composition, forethought, or logic. It also overshadows the historical connections between black composers and jazz; most notably Scott Joplin.

It must be noted that neither Braxton nor Lewis is criticizing Cage's *music* per se; they are both extremely catholic composers and musicians.[42] They are merely calling for a more historically accurate account of the "experimental" music of the twentieth-century, with the recognition that many "experimental" and "avant-garde" concepts are matched by, if not synonymous with, developments in music that get denied high art status; i.e., jazz. The point is that *there is no pure improvisation any more than there is pure composition,* and furthermore that the "experimental" practices of Eurological composers are more closely related to *improvisation* than their own terminology would suggest.

John Cage's ambivalent relationship to black music echoes the same kinds of resistance to black aesthetic forms that we find throughout (white) literary modernism. On the one hand, white artists saw the uniqueness of black art, but because of their own racist attitudes, imbibed through centuries of structural prejudice, they remained hesitant to fully acknowledge the importance, much less the influence of black culture on their own thinking. Cage's comments below provide a relevant example:

> Methods of writing percussion music have as their goal the rhythmic structure of a composition. As soon as these methods are crystallized into one of several widely accepted methods, the means will exist for group improvisations of unwritten but culturally important music. This has already taken place in Oriental cultures and in hot jazz.[43]

This passage comes from a text written in 1937 called "The Future of Music: Credo." Here we can see the tension of Cage's attitudes towards improvisation: not only does he cite the importance of percussion—the instrument family responsible for some of the most important developments in jazz, via the invention of the drumset—he also acknowledges that "culturally important" music already exists, in the form of "group improvisations" in "Oriental" and "hot jazz" styles. Cage had what he was looking (and listening) for right in front of him but refused to fully credit the direct influence of these improvisational musics on his *own* work.

Is this being unfair to Cage? Can't an artist, after all, acknowledge the similarities of their work to what has come before without relinquishing their own creative talent? And is it inaccurate in the long run to call Cage's wide body of work "improvisational"? I think what is at stake here is not the degree to which Cage's music is improvisational—and I would argue that much of it is—but rather the degree to which his discourse about improvisation, connected as it inevitably is to issues of race, falls into a long tradition of ambivalence and distrust of African-American-derived improvisational music. Like Pound, Stein, and Stevens, Cage presents a frustrating but common example of the white artist who cannot fully admit the connections between their work and African-American cultural forms. Explicating Cage and his compositions/improvisations is beyond the scope of this book. But within the work of the poets under analysis I hope to more clearly illuminate the connections between their artistic procedures and the contemporaneous African-American culture.

Braxton and Lewis's argument has much wider implications. Even though they are specifically referring to events related to post-1950 American music, a similar terminological smokescreen often serves to disconnect the various modernist avant-garde movements from the underlying African and African-American cultural forms that have significantly influenced them. As Jed Rasula has suggested in his essay "Jazz as Decal for the European Avant-Garde," the European wing of the various avant-garde movements were often more amenable than their American counterparts to embracing jazz.[44] But even when the artists themselves fessed up to their sometimes admittedly primitivistic jazz fetish, the critical discourse surrounding the avant-garde—especially in literature—has tended to ignore the significance of jazz on modernism.

Rasula rightly critiques Alfred Appel's 2002 book *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* in its discounting of "the extent to which something called 'jazz' was absorbed into the modernist avant-garde."[45]

Similarly, Marjorie Perloff's lucid account of new kinds of modernist experimentation, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy,* nevertheless adopts the Cagian terminology in its title, and thereby deflects the issue of improvisation.[46] Ironically, in her chapter on Pound, Perloff cites a review by W. B. Yeats of Pound's *Cantos* that uses the word "improvisatore" to chastise Pound's writing.[47] Perloff rightly states that, Yeats's criticism notwithstanding: "Interruptions and twists, 'unbridged transitions,' and 'unexplained ejaculations,' the poetic act as 'brilliant improvisa[tion]'—these are accepted as a matter of course by contemporary poets and their readers."[48]

Is improvisation a better fit than indeterminacy? I'm not arguing here that terms like indeterminacy, aleatory, automatic, or even avant-garde itself *should* be replaced by improvisation, any more than I would say that we should take away Cage's term indeterminacy when he uses it to describe his own work. I am arguing, however, that improvisation should become more commonplace in the list of words that comprise the critical catalogue of modernist techniques. I am curious as to why a link between Dada, Surrealism, and many other isms—even futurism, with its focus on novelty and newness, and as I argue later, Imagism and Vorticism—could not be said to be improvisation, as much as indeterminacy.

The heart of the matter is that racism, as well as a related belief that improvisation connotes a lack of sophistication or planning, made the use of the term improvisation less desirable to describe Anglo- and Euro-American artistic procedures which are themselves examples of improvisation: from automatic writing, oral poetic performance, early Dada "happenings" in the Cabaret Voltaire, or the writing of the poets in this book, to cite a few examples. At issue, then, is something beyond the evidence of the "influence" of improvisation. While there are clear connections between white and black cultural production, as critics like Ann Douglas have begun to more fully account for, the larger issue for this study is the relevance of improvisation as a concept in discussions of modernism. While jazz and African-American cultural forms are important avatars of improvisation, the word and the technique in a larger sense demand a more serious evaluation.

Jazz itself, as a word, still retains too many of the negative stereotypes and levity associated with its early days. This is one reason why many jazz musicians are uncomfortable labeling their music as "jazz" in the first place. As drummer Max Roach recounted in 1972: "The term 'jazz' has come to mean the abuse and exploitation of black musicians; it has come to mean cultural prejudice and condescension. It has come to mean all of these things, and that is why I am presently writing a book, *I Hate Jazz.* It's not my name and it means my oppression as a man and musician."[49]

Improvisation unfortunately retains these same kinds of connections—look no farther than headlines about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for descriptions of "Improvised Explosive Devices"—and thus lacks the critical and cultural value that other terms have warranted. In the course of this book I hope to prove the relevance of improvisation per se—not only Afrological-derived

improvisation—and encourage a re-evaluation of the term's validity to critical discourse in modernist studies.

The negative connotations of improvisation aside, another obstacle in viewing improvisation as a *literary technique* and thus using it as a critical term, is the fact that improvisation is thought of primarily as a performance practice. Improvisation, in other words, seems distant from the seemingly fixed domain of writing, even in our post-Derridean world. I will now turn to this issue, and map out my procedures for reading improvisation in modernist writing.

Literary Improvisation, Jazz, and Modernism

Is it possible to improvise on paper, to use improvisation in writing? We can see the paradox of speaking of a piece of writing as improvised if we are focused on a performance-based model of improvisation. If a performance is fixed, how can it be an improvisation? Given the nature of writing, and the process of revision, editing, revision, editing, printing/publishing, reprinting, and so on, we *could* say that the entire writing process is an extended improvisation, where a set of materials (words, a poem, a novel, etc.) is developed over time and achieves a final form (i.e., the published work—but this itself takes multiple and mutable forms). Such is also the case for a jazz improvisation, which might actually begin in conception as a musician learns a tune by practicing at home, rehearsing with musicians, and then performing it in public. Of course the major difference here is the ephemeral nature of the "final" jazz improvisation; unlike a book, unless it is recorded there is no documentation of a performance.

Yet even recordings of jazz music are less fixed than one might expect; both in terms of the improvised nature of the music itself, but also in the technical manipulation used to alter the "original" (which was already a mutable, improvised "product") through overdubbing, remastering, etc. Paradoxically, such manipulations can cause jazz to become reified in a manner similar to other "fixed" artwork. Nevertheless, the dynamic between live performance, recordings of live performance, studio trickery, and further revisions of those recordings and trickery (in the form of reissues of "jazz classics") forms a constantly changing stream of performances within the capitalist commodification of the music.[50]

It is this ephemeral nature, the notion that what you are hearing has never happened before and will never happen again, that makes musical improvisation particularly captivating for musician and listener. Most of the writers that I focus on—Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein—were deeply invested in the aural and performance aspect of literature, and this is one way in which we can see the influence of improvisational practice in their work. The concept of "jazz poetry" via the Beats is by now a familiar concept, to the point where the poet accompanied by jazz combo is a nostalgic footnote to the counterculture of the 1950s.

The poet performing his or her work with musical accompaniment seems to be the most obvious example of an interaction between text and improvisation. Even if the text is fixed, a performance of a given piece will change, just as classical music or other genres of composition change, from performance to performance. This kind of aural improvisation can be found in the careers of Pound and Hughes in particular, who both read to musical accompaniment—in Pound's case, his own amateur drumming—and participated in various other recorded and live performance situations: radio plays, operas, etc. In fact, it is a focus on the *aural* nature of language that plays a significant part in my reading of Hughes, Pound, and Stein's work as improvisational. But this still doesn't get us past the issue of the poem on the printed page. How are these texts improvisational?

Let me step back for a moment and reassert a point that bears continued emphasis: an improvisation can never be "pure" anymore than a fixed composition can be "pure." There are structured and less-structured varieties of improvisation. In his study of literary improvisation Philip Pastras details the historical precedents for modernist improvised writing. Among these earlier examples, he lists "the Gothic romance, the idea of poetry as fantasia, the emphasis on spontaneity, [and] the incantational enumeration of the catalogue."[51] He states that "The kinds of writing that can be described as improvisation are many and varied: from the Homeric poems (in fact, all oral epic traditions) to Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* essays, to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, to surrealist automatism—the list is long and presents a variety of genres, authors, languages and historical periods."[52] In order to explain how these disparate examples of writing can be considered improvisatory, Pastras develops a taxonomy of literary improvisation, encompassing three distinct but related kinds of improvisation:

> (1) as a *mode* of composition, when the writing becomes spontaneous on its own, without regard to the intentions or to the working habits of the writer (in other words, what most writers and critics call "inspiration"); (2) as a *method* of composition, when an author improvises in order to create the raw material out of which he refines his poems or stories; (3) as a *discipline* when a writer trains himself to improvise with such skill that he can give form to an emotion as he feels it, and give shape to an impulse as it arises.[53]

Pastras goes on to assert that "The arts of drama and music certainly require the discipline of improvisation, even if the actors or musicians are performing "set" pieces: performance allows no room for revision, and improvisation is a means of training an artist's concentration."[54]

For Pastras, the "discipline" of improvisation is most important, and he therefore focuses primarily on two poets who explicitly state that they are improvising in this manner: William Carlos Williams and Yannis Ritsos.[55] But Pastras also points out that it is often hard to determine whether or not a work is *intentionally* improvised, creating an interesting relationship between

a reader's perception and a writer's technique: ". . . the difference between improvisation as method and as discipline has more to do with the intentions of the writer than with the extent of his revisions."[56] For example, Pastras argues that Byron was interested in "creating the *effect* of improvisation" in a poem like *Don Juan* and hence he is using improvisation as *method*, rather than *discipline*.[57] On the other hand, Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* essays do not appear to be improvised, even though they were composed under the *discipline* of improvisation—in other words, the essays' highly-polished form belies their quick composition.[58]

Both of these situations have analogies in jazz improvisation. In the former case, a musician can construct a solo, for example, based on the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic rules of a given structure (i.e., a popular song on which the musician will improvise). This preparation can be accomplished in the practice room, over a series of hours, days, weeks, or years, until the ultimate performance of this material becomes second nature to the musician, and hence paradoxically feels spontaneous. The latter case is a related phenomenon, facilitated by a highly sophisticated ability to improvise also due to long hours of practice. Many jazz improvisers—John Coltrane and Keith Jarrett, for example—have been noted for their remarkable ability to "spontaneously compose" highly coherent, logical musical statements of great length. Both of the above situations complicate the conventional view of a "pure improvisation." A solo performance in jazz, then, is a balance between spontaneity and planning, based on the particular improviser's technical skill on their instrument and previous discipline in learning their craft.

Because of the ambiguity in the "planned" vs. "unplanned" structure of improvisation, Pastras's framework implies that even if an author does not *intend* to make an improvisational work, from the viewpoint of the reader we can describe a given work as improvised in the following ways, slightly modifying Pastras's taxonomy:

1. By investigating the author's compositional technique and determining whether or not it is improvisational; in other words, showing that the work was done in one sitting, in a rush of inspiration—the *discipline* of improvisation—*regardless of how structured or unstructured it appears*. Often the most spontaneous improvisations constitute sophisticated structures.
2. By locating and naming the *improvisational effects* in a text—the *method* of improvisation, even if the author doesn't name it as such—and again, this might mean interpreting terms like "indeterminacy," "aleatory," "imagistic," or other such tags as analogues to improvisation. Here we might define various formal features such as: fragments; free-verse poetic structures which expand and contract to fit an author's themes; excessive wordplay and attention to the aural dimensions of language (thereby bringing the language closer to the realm of music).

3. By developing a theory of improvisation—close to what Pastras calls a "mode"—exhibiting the metaphysical and philosophical ideas inherent in improvisation itself, and by tracing this theory within a given text. I believe this is what Pastras means when he states, "Because a sense of time is so crucial to even a simple dictionary-definition of improvisation, the subject itself moves with astonishing rapidity into the swamps of the metaphysical, aesthetic and ontological speculation."[59]

Rather than getting "swamped" by the idea of time, however, modernist writing often attempts to express what it feels like to be in time. Existing in time, and expressing what it feels like to be in time, is perhaps what makes improvisation such a powerful aesthetic technique as well as a potentially useful life-practice. As Porter Abbott has noted of the "wisdom" which we can possibly extract from "reader-resistant" modernist texts, improvisation also implies an openness to "knowing what it feels like not to know."[60] The "theory of improvisation" which I will most often draw on to discuss the improvisational traits of my poets, as I will detail below, derives from William James.

I will employ all three of the above modes of analysis in the following chapters. All of the authors discussed use some amount of improvisational *discipline*: Pound with his typewriter carriage banging away as an odd prefiguration of Kerouac, Hughes writing blues and jazz-influenced verse in the moment, Stein transcribing her thoughts onto the blank page, and Stevens composing poems to the rhythms of his walking and breathing. The work of all of these poets also exhibits the *method* of improvisation: in Pound and Hughes, for example, we find a system of recombinant fragments that provides the source material for longer "open works."

This latter phrase, coined by Umberto Eco, is another analogue for improvisation. Significantly, Eco discusses jazz and improvisation sympathetically, as in the following passage where he ponders the relevance of improvisation as a narrative device in television montage: "This should in itself be enough to make us reconsider certain aesthetic concepts, or at least to lend them greater flexibility, in particular those concerning the productive process and the personality of the author, the distinction between process and result, and the relationship between a finished work and its antecedents (or, more broadly, what led to it)."[61]

In his articulation of improvisation, Eco outlines the shift in focus that a discussion of improvisation requires; even as I analyze given works by each poet, what might be more important than the works themselves is the *process* in which the works take part. This requires, therefore, an attention to my third perspective outlined above, the development of a theory of improvisation that can be seen both in a given artist's work and in the life of that artist. Here I negotiate the complex relationships between improvisation and its origins in African-American culture on my group of poets, while also connecting their

work to other improvisational arenas; most notably, the philosophy of William James.

Pragmatist Improvisations

William James, and the Pragmatic tradition he represents one version of, is a philosopher of improvisation.[62] James's work is a model for a more generalized American sense of improvisation that transformed modernism in myriad ways. Pragmatism is a way of improvising a philosophy, as it were—being able to hold firm values and morals while realizing that the world and our own consciousness are mutable constructs. In this sense James can be considered an important Anglo-American example of what African-American and other oppressed segments of the Americas had already been realizing for many generations: life in the Americas demanded a quick wit, an ability to take nothing and make it into something, and to learn to communicate and entertain in new ways.

James was personally connected to Gertrude Stein as her teacher and friend, and his ideas have significant bearing on the poetry of Stein and Stevens in particular. By discussing these poets in relation to James, and connecting James's ideas to improvisation, I hope to avoid the common trap of glomming onto a theory in order to validate an argument. Rather, I see James's Pragmatism and his notions of consciousness to be a fitting framework from which to view improvisation in America, especially since it grew up in the same soil and confronts similar problems. Both jazz and Pragmatism responded to turn-of-the-century questions surrounding identity, freedom, discipline, and pleasure.

The other famous James brother, Henry, actually supplied Pastras with the title of his dissertation on improvisation, *A Clear Field*.[63] This phrase comes from the preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, wherein James outlines his own theory of literary improvisation. Discussing the varieties of imaginative storytelling which inspired his story, he states that "The charm of all these things for the distracted modern mind is in the clear field of experience, as I call it, over which we are thus led to roam; an annexed but independent world in which nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it."[64] Here James echoes his brother's notions of "ambulatory thought": the "roaming" of human consciousness, discovering ideas along the way.[65] This passage also foregrounds the power of the imagination to shape reality, but only after having come to that reality in a heightened state of awareness—ready to live in the moment. Henry's pithy definition of improvisation follows; or rather, a definition of what he desires to do through improvisational writing. In this definition he echoes William's figure for consciousness—the "stream":

> To improvise with extreme freedom and yet at the same time without the possibility of ravage, without the hint of a flood; to keep the stream, in a word, on

> something like ideal terms with itself; that was here my definite business. The thing was to aim at absolute singleness, clearness, and roundness, and yet to depend on the imagination working freely, working (call it) with extravagance; by which law it would n't be thinkable except as free and would n't be amusing except as controlled.[66]

This is as precise an articulation of what happens during improvisation as any I have encountered. Here James describes the central challenge of improvising: remaining free while maintaining control. In this he anticipates an equally useful conception of improvisation—James Baldwin's description of jazz improvisation from his short story, "Sonny's Blues":

> All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason.[67]

I have long thought that this passage was an apt description of improvisation. The irony is that Baldwin uses *words* to capture the essence of a procedure he claims to be unnamable. What we see throughout the work of the poets in this book is a similar struggle to use language to express the ineffable, and to chart lived realities as they are transformed by the creative power of the imagination. This process requires a wholesale re-evaluation of the semantic potential in language itself, which is why the poets themselves often turned to *music* as a practice and as an analogue to their work.

The interaction between music and text frequently displays the tension in trying to make meaning out of words that are inherently difficult to communicate with. In everyday communication and artistic representation alike, meaning in language has the potential to be destroyed or transformed into something unrecognizable from moment to moment. In the work of poets like Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens, an "inner music" (or "fictive music" as Stevens once called it) is developed through improvisational practice and theory employed in order to push language to its limits and see what happens.[68] As Eric Prieto has noted, the "specifically [modernist] narrative use of music is unprecedented in literary history," and this "interest in music should be situated . . . with respect to the historical crisis in the mimetic function of literature that occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century."[69] Akin to the shakeups in physics and other natural sciences, culminating in relativity and uncertainty, the status of mimesis in art was up for grabs as the modernists experimented with new modes of portraying consciousness (and the unconscious). Modernist writers turned to music "as a model for the semiotic

functioning of the narrative text, affecting the ways their narratives make and communicate meaning."[70]

While Prieto concentrates on prose narrative as distinguished from poetry, similar uses of music as a model for mapping cognition occurs in modernist poetics. Not coincidentally, then, the philosophy of William James, with its attention to the mutable, fleet movements of thought, serves as an important touchstone for the American strain of improvisational practice. Through a pragmatics of improvisation, these poets turned to ideas and practices usually associated with music in order to make poetry more fully engaged in describing and *being* experience.

Improvisation allows for constant change and adaptation within a predetermined structure. In jazz and other music which employs improvisation, the tension between the structure and the possible ways to develop ideas within that structure (or even "break the rules" and go beyond the confines of the structure) not only keeps the audience attentive, but also demands that the artist be constantly aware of his or her surroundings and own limitations in the process of making music.

Thus, improvisation implies a deep connection between the personal and the communal, self and world. A "good" musical improviser successfully navigates musical and institutional boundaries and the desire for self-expression, pleasing not only herself but the listener as well; or to paraphrase Henry and William James, the improviser skillfully balances between the poles of control and freedom in the stream of consciousness.

A pragmatic reading of improvisation brings us back to the potential ethical dimension of improvisation. Such a reading might show how an individual could function within a structured society while still maintaining agency and aesthetic (and thus potentially political) autonomy. In the poetry of Stein and Stevens, as well as that of Pound and Hughes, then, we often find revisions, and repetitions with variation: features that point towards the provisionality and mutability of life itself. We can therefore revisit Stein's "cubist" writing and view it—or rather, *hear* it—through the lens of improvisation. Similarly, Stevens's work, which is often read in relation to visual art, can be analyzed in terms of the linguistic and *aural* function of making "notes towards a supreme fiction." There can only be notes (in the musical and scripted sense) because those notes will never be able to encompass the entire range of experience; moreover, experience is always changing just as individual consciousness is always changing (the Jamesian "stream").

Poetry as a process of charting reality thus becomes analogously as fleeting and ephemeral as a jazz performance in that its expressive powers are no more able to "fully represent" reality than music—precisely because reality itself is contingent, provisional, metamorphic. My focus here is primarily on works that foreground their own provisionality, such as Stevens's *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,* Pound's *Cantos* (which was published piecemeal throughout his life under titles bearing words like "drafts" and "fragments"), and Hughes's

Montage of a Dream Deferred. These works—notes, drafts, and montage—offer a view into the stream of consciousness; frozen like a recording of a jazz solo which itself is both the product of predetermined, structural and aesthetic demands as well as spontaneous decisions, the poems of provisionality demonstrate that even the supposedly stable, fixed ink of text can be a place where author and reader alike are faced with the ever-shifting imagination of reality and the reality of the imagination.

The more philosophical dimensions of improvisation as sketched out above entail a shift from my original intentions for this project. I had begun with the intention of investigating the relationship between music and poetry in the modernist period. And while my subject matter quickly moved to the more complicated and less-musically specific realm of improvisation, the fact that all of my poets were engaged in a significant amount of musical activity—performing music, collaborating on musical projects, or writing about music—demands an attention to their musical lives. These musical pursuits are important sites for analyzing the extent to which the respective writers were involved in improvisation, and for locating the complexity of their interactions with African-American culture.

What is the logic behind the selection of the poets discussed herein? I have already addressed my reasons for limiting my analysis to American modernist writers. But why poets? I chose poets because I believe that poetry, with its historical ties to music, is an appropriate medium to discuss in relation to improvisation. Of course, as I hope I have by now demonstrated, improvisation is not limited to poetry any more than it is to music. Moreover, as Daniel Albright, Marjorie Perloff and other critics have noted, the formal variety and creation of new, multimedia forms within the modernist period makes the category of "poetry" only one possible way of describing much modernist writing.[71] Nevertheless, the original musico-poetic angle of my argument has stuck. All of these poets were engaged in writing in various forms, and I try to address the varieties of these forms and their relationship to improvisation.

I could have written on any one of a number of poets in this book. A short list might include Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, H. D., Sterling Brown, Claude McKay, and T. S. Eliot. Eliot is perhaps the most-discussed Anglo-American modernist poet when it comes to jazz and poetry. Ralph Ellison and Edward Kamau Braithwaite, among other writers, have expressed a sense of the importance of black cultural forms in modernism when they heard "jazz rhythms" (the phrase is Ellison's) in *The Waste Land*.[72] I hope that by discussing Eliot's more radical (in a number of ways) friend Pound—who edited Eliot's long poem and hence significantly shaped its musical effects—I can account for some unsuspected trajectories of those "jazz rhythms." The poets discussed here are not unfamiliar to modernist criticism, but by grouping them in the way I have under the sign of improvisation, I hope to shed new light on their work and to inspire further work on additional writers.

Chapter Outline

This book is divided into five further chapters, the first four of which focus on the work of an individual poet, and the dynamics of improvisation within that work. Chapter 1 details the poetic and musical projects of Ezra Pound. What I hope to show in my discussion of Pound is his contradictory yet significant relationship with African and African-American culture, and how this interest dovetails with the improvisational characteristics of his work. I look at Pound's lifelong devotion to music as an idea and practice in this light, and investigate his relationship with composer George Antheil, his contributions to Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology, and his amateur drumming skills. I also highlight the *method* and theories of improvisation found in his lifelong poetic project, the *Cantos*. As a sometimes successful improviser—or, as Yeats called him, using the older term, an "improvisatore"—in his poetry, Pound and racism seemingly contradict the potential insights of his work. In turning to improvisation as the key to Pound, I show one possible pragmatic re-reading of Pound that may demonstrate what Hugh Kenner calls the "highly American quality of Pound's poetry, "which suffices to turn the closed field inside out, and make it an instrument of possibilities, not foreclosures."[73]

Chapter 2 highlights the "jazz consciousness" in the life and work of Langston Hughes.[74] Hughes is the poet most explicitly connected to the worlds of jazz and other African-American improvisational aesthetics in this book. Yet Hughes is rarely seen as a modernist writer in the same category as other poets like Pound, Stein, or Stevens. Rather than relegate Hughes to a "separate-but-equal" Harlem Renaissance aesthetic, I argue that Hughes was a transnational poet whose aesthetic and personal life represents an important modernist story. Hughes, like most modernists, was in fact interested in and active in many different modern*isms*. I discuss his relationship to Imagism and Ezra Pound, his own improvisational long poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred,* and his collaborations with jazz musicians. As one of the first American writers—black or white—to argue for the cultural, political, and aesthetic potential of jazz, Hughes stands as a pivotal advocate of the African-American and improvisational currents circulating throughout modernism.

If Pound and Hughes represent a provisional binary relationship between modernist Eurological and Afrological improvisational aesthetics, then Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens highlight the more philosophical aspects of improvisatory modernism via the philosophy of William James. Chapter 3 outlines Stein's relationship with William James and the way in which her poetry was influenced by that relationship. I also focus on the aural features of Stein's poetry, and the way in which her work encourages us to think about language in new ways via this attention to sound. Like all the poets discussed here, Stein's relationship to African-American culture is also important, and to illuminate this relationship I look at her story *Melanctha* and her collaboration with composer Virgil Thomson, the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of Wallace Stevens's work, looking at and listening to Stevens's soundworld and how sound, noise, and music play a central role in his poetic project. This soundworld has important implications for the improvisational dimensions of his work, which I discuss in relation to a number of shorter poems as well as Stevens's long poem *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

In the Conclusion, I round out the book with a summary of some of the potential insights gained from a discussion of modernist literature in terms of improvisation, and I pose further questions for research.

No improvisation is ever complete or "finished": in light of my earlier discussion of the potential ethics of improvisation, I hope to show that the relationships between white and black modernists as characterized in this book can help us more clearly understand the dynamics of not only improvisation, but America's difficult and ongoing struggle to ensure equal rights for all. By focusing on three white poets and one black poet, I am not apologizing for the realities of those white poets' racist attitudes. Ezra Pound in particular is a polarizing figure, and to some readers his presence in a discussion of improvisation, particularly linking him to African-American culture, might seem ludicrous or offensive. But what I hope to show in the following pages is that the contradictory and problematic racism of someone like Pound can be an instructive site for learning about the ethics of improvisation, as much as the more comfortable political sphere of Langston Hughes. As Giles Gunn has stated, echoing Kenneth Burke's concept of "trading with the enemy":

> Reconceiving identity in relation to notions of difference rather than of sameness, therefore, need not accentuate division, estrangement, stigmatization, enmity. Rather, it is one way—and perhaps the only way—that division, estrangement, stigmatization, and enmity may be controlled, if not actually overcome.[75]

As a longtime musical improviser, I have come to see how different personalities and aesthetic tastes can come together to make music. This music is not, however, as it is so commonly characterized (especially since the Ken Burns *Jazz* documentary), a utopian space of perfect interaction between equals.[76] A more nuanced view of improvisation reveals—and I believe this is also the project at the heart of critical improvisation studies carried out by the likes of Heble, Fischlin, and others—a constantly negotiated framework of sometimes contradictory possibilities. It is hard work to keep it all going, precisely because we don't always agree. I hope that this book functions in a similar way; coalescing into a coherent narrative while keeping alive the constant change and conflict at the heart of improvisational practice.

Chapter 1

Ezra Pound: Music, History, Time

. . . but the Divine Mind is abundant
unceasing
improvisatore
Omniformis
Unstill

Ezra Pound, Canto 92

In a 1936 assessment of the *Cantos,* William Butler Yeats complained of the difficulty that both he and many other readers have faced when approaching his protégé Ezra Pound's poetry:

> Even where there is no interruption, [Pound] is often content, if certain verses and lines have style, to leave unabridged transitions, unexplained ejaculations, that make his meaning unintelligible . . . Even where the style is sustained throughout one gets an impression, especially when he is writing *vers libre*, that he has not got all the wine into the bowl, that he is a brilliant improvisator . . .[1]

Ironically, Yeats's damnation with faint praise, as Marjorie Perloff points out, shows a contemporary reader how the "negatives have become the positives of a later generation of poets, of those like Allen Ginsberg or Frank O'Hara."[2] What is particularly interesting about Yeats's faint praise, and what provides an important link between the 1950s-era poets that Perloff includes in the Pound legacy, is the word "improvisator."

As I have recounted in the introduction, Phillip Pastras has demonstrated that the role of the *improvisatore* was a concept familiar to many European poets, and was most often used pejoratively to differentiate well-written, composed verse from off-the-cuff rhyming.[3] Both Ginsberg and O'Hara were connected with the theory and practice of improvisation. Allen Ginsberg, who once visited Pound in the elder poet's declining years, was a key figure of the Beat Generation, the group of poets and artists perhaps most closely associated in American literature with jazz (other than the poets of the Harlem Renaissance). Ginsberg is often cited as a poet who, in the words of his fellow Beat Jack Kerouac, composed "spontaneous bop prosody."[4] Frank O'Hara, while not typically described as a Beat Poet, was a fellow traveler and himself a fan of the music, having written one of the most powerful "jazz poems" of the 1950s, chronicling the death of Billie Holiday: *The Day Lady Died.* O'Hara also developed, almost on a whim, a spontaneous style of poetry which he later called "I do this, I do that" poems; dashed off over a quick bite to eat somewhere in Midtown Manhattan, O'Hara's work became a measure of the constantly varied, fast-paced pulse of city life.[5]

To the mystic Yeats, "improvisator" was naturally pejorative—perhaps an occasionally useful quality, but not something that should be evident in the finished product of a poem. Yet it is precisely this aliveness, this "spilling over" of experience via language, to use Yeats's wine-bowl imagery, which poets like O'Hara in his "lunch poems" and Ginsberg in his Whitmanesque Jazz Yawps would treasure as the essence of their poetics. These writers engage in a poetics that tracks the life of language as it happens (or at least gives the illusion of doing this), a poetics that traces the outlines of reality as it happens, and translates this reality into a fluid, musical language.

Ironically, the reading style that Pound learned from Yeats, a haunting drawl that exaggerates syllables and peculiar enunciations, was supposed to imitate a similar kind of musical speech, that of the bard creating stories in song.[6] Even when typed on the page, we are supposed to *hear* in our mind's ear the sound of this song-speech. As Daniel Albright has stated of the most well-known portion of the *Cantos*, "We might call the Pisan Cantos a heuristic opera, in which we are expected to improvise our own tunes as we read the text."[7] Pound's poetry thus puts us in the position of unpacking the meaning not only of his words, but of what it means to make meaning with language; in other words, we begin to see the importance of the poem as a *process* of consciousness, an activity—as Albright's adjective "heuristic" implies—rather than an object.

Pound's Canto 92, written decades after Yeats initial review, states that the Divine Mind is an "*improvisatore*." But was Pound himself an *improvisatore*? Would Pound have considered this appellation insult or praise? And what would it mean for a poet to write an "improvisational" poem in the decades which also saw the creation of one of the most important improvisation-based musics of the Americas, particularly when that music—jazz—was the creation of primarily African Americans who Pound himself often mocked in tones originating not from the jazz bandstand but from the minstrel show?

In this chapter, I discuss the complex figure of Ezra Pound, improviser, and the sometimes contradictory impulses behind what I call—following from Pastras's taxonomy—his "improvisational mode" of life and work. I will focus on several themes in an attempt to understand Pound's relation to and use of improvisation:

1. Pound's aesthetic practice specifically in relation to the *Cantos*
2. Pound's career as a musician, composer, and music critic, with particular emphasis on his relationship with American composer George Antheil
3. Pound's musical predilections in relation to his views on race: specifically African Americans, since it is through jazz that improvisation most notably enters American aesthetics.

Pound's interest in other non-Western cultures, such as China, India, and Africa, also reveals further connections between improvisation in music and in

poetry, and I place these connections within the larger context of the improvisational mode.

Pound's theories about music and rhythm were, as Brad Bucknell points out, "part of the substructure of his attempt to make poetic language both concrete and spatial. The irony is that music, the supposed art of time, is brought most prominently into writing (another time-bound art) at the point of disruption or complication of the successive level of language."[8] In other words, Pound uses the ephemeral art of music to "prove" the assertions he is trying to make in writing, which are supposed to hold their own ground independent of interpretation or explanation. This is certainly not to say that Pound was a deficient craftsman with a poor ear for meter and rhythm. It is to say, however, that my analysis is concerned precisely with the points at which Pound's own surety breaks down; the points where his claims to dominance—"dubious immanence," as Bucknell would have it—over life and art via his formal and technical brilliance are called into question. More accurately, what is in question are the claims that Pound makes for the moral and ethical effects of such mastery, and what it means to reread, from the perspective of critical improvisation studies, Pound's "failure" to complete the *Cantos*. As Michael Golston puts it, "what would it mean for a 'totalitarian' treatise on political order to be random, disordered, confusing, and opaque?"[9] Part of the answer to that question, I argue, is that Pound was improvising in spite of himself.

Despite his frequent exhortations of and attempts at achieving completeness, closure, and totality, Pound's work (especially the *Cantos*), reveal a poet who was in many ways often democratic and dialogic, and often performing, often "making it up as he went along" because he hadn't yet figured out how to complete his social, literary, or philosophical projects. Aesthetically and personally, Pound was a figure on the move, impatient, and driven to a transient existence by the idiosyncrasies of his beliefs, the vicissitudes of a world at war, and the normal ups and downs of a writer's life. Because of these facts, and because so much of Pound's work as a whole was devoted to the study of, theorizing of, and production of music (and poetry invested in music), an analysis of the relationship between Pound's work and improvisation proves extremely fruitful for understanding his work as a whole as well as for understanding the significance of the—to use Hugh Kenner's phrase—"interesting mistakes" Pound made, in spite of his desire for Fascist totality.[10]

As if to annoy Yeats's ghost many years later, in what would become the final major section of the *Cantos*, Pound reminds the reader that there is a virtue in "spilling the wine" out of the bowl a little. He even compares this drunkenness of spirit to Yeats's mystical bent for Byzantium:

> Mr. Yeats called it Byzantium,
> Emphorio, to be borne about, to be filled with
> oinos, the fermented
>
> (96:661)[11]

Filled with the *oinos* of his many years of struggle (much of it against self-delusion), Pound seems to realize at moments like this that his long poem is a trick of an "improvisatore." "Going with the flow"—the flowing wine, the flow of history, the flow of words across the page, the Heracleitian flow of life's river, and the flow of sounds gushing into speech and into songs—this is one of the central lessons of the *Cantos*. Thus, Pound constantly echoes the title of the initial segment of the poem, published as *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. This introductory piece foreshadowed the provisional nature of the poem as a whole—a draft—and the flowing, drunken improvisation that would guide the compositional and mental processes of the poet: a draft/draught of wine that Yeats dared not drink. The "Divine Mind" sought by the poet is an "unceasing . . . *improvisatore*"—A Dionysian poet, singing a drunken song.

Pound's Songs

I. The Improvisational Mode

One problem with the musical analyses of poetry is that, as Eric Prieto has asserted, it is impossible for "actual music" to occur in written language.[12] Partly for this reason, I devote much of this chapter to an analysis of biographical and historical material to emphasize the cultural and personal reasons that Pound should be considered a "musical" and improvisational poet. While Pound might not have named his methods of writing (either music or poetry), or his way of living, as "improvisational," I hope that by highlighting a wealth of historical, biographical, and poetic materials dealing with the improvisational mode in connection to Pound will illuminate him from a new perspective. Pastras's nuanced view of the improvisational mode as a feature of a work that can be present independent of an author's intentions will therefore be useful for this discussion, but I also wish to expand on his notion of a mode to include more than just literary output.[13]

The roots of Pound's improvisational poetics lie in his lifelong interest in the connections between poetry and music. Given Pound's multiple enthusiasms, it is hard to find anything that he *wasn't* interested in (or interested in criticizing) at some point in his life, but music was a constant touchstone for Pound. It was not only an influence on his work; at times it *became* his work. Many modernist writers were interested in music, but Pound was one of the most rigorous of the modernists in the development of his musical ideas and how they became formalized in his poetry, his more general career as a writer, and in his aesthetic and philosophical outlook.

A considerable amount of his time in the interwar period was spent in Europe attending concerts, writing reviews of these concerts, promoting musicians, and composing and performing his own music. Additionally, the importance of music in his life is demonstrated by his relationships with two

important women—concert pianist Katherine Ruth Heyman, and violinist Olga Rudge, his mistress from 1922 until his death.[14]

This chapter will analyze the improvisational aspect of Pound's poetry by focusing on his education in music and performance, his music criticism, and his subsequent writing of music. I describe the entire corpus of Pound's work, specifically his long poem the *Cantos*, which from the 1920s on became his primary poetic output, as an "improvisational mode" built from fragments which themselves are often "open," provisional, relational, and sometimes even revisions or transformations of previous Poundian texts. I argue that this improvisational mode was the de facto framework within which, frustratingly at worst and skillfully at best, Pound worked for most of his career. While literary criticism has developed a variety of useful terms to describe works which foreground their unfinished, provisional, open qualities—such as Umberto Eco's "open work, " Italo Calvino's designation of "encyclopedic novel," and Pound acolyte Charles Olsen's concept of "Open Field" (echoing the Jamesian description of improvisation outlined in my introduction)—my concept of improvisational mode in relation to Pound (and to the subsequent authors discussed in this book) is based less on literary-formal boundaries or definitions than on the process-based, temporal, nonverbal features found in musical performance.[15]

I use the term "mode" in order to pun off of the musical meaning of the term—an ordered series of pitches which make up what often are called "scales" (the Western major and minor scales are themselves specific kinds of modes)—but also to indicate that rather than a specific style or genre which Pound wrote in, his "mode" of working was again most importantly a process, an idea, and a reality of his poetic practice. Pound wrote in many "modes": critic, correspondent, translator, composer, madman. The improvisational mode in Pound's work is ultimately a "mode of modes." The sum of all of Pound's diverse interests, predilections, translations and mistranslations, "interdisciplinary" and inter-genre writing and performance make up an ever-changing improvisational flow of aesthetic production. In this way I differentiate my use of "mode" from Pastras's, which is more strictly limited to particular texts that exhibit a spontaneous spirit or appearance.

The rhetorical and epistemological struggle as manifested in the *Cantos* is a crucial manifestation of the "improvisational mode." Like a mode in musical terms, which is essentially merely a series of notes which can be refined by placing special emphasis on certain pitches and the relationship between those pitches (providing structure but not completing disabling possibilities for melodic invention) the "improvisational mode" of Pound and other poets' work allows for a range of particular formal, rhetorical, ideological, spiritual, and mixed-media elements to be grouped together in a loose but nevertheless structured whole. Importantly, it is *not* "a list of whatever the poet feels like including"—although Pastras does point out the important improvisational dimensions of the poetic catalogue as deployed by Whitman and other

poets—but rather an open structure determined by outside historical and formal constraints as well as what has already been included in the poem.[16] Thus the tension and interest is built by seeing how the poet "breaks his own rules" as he makes them up.

The modernist long poem in a sense is always built from smaller units of experimentation, fragments of what a poet will think can work with, hang together, or contrast with other pre-existing material. Also important to the long poem which takes an improvisational mode is that it be changeable, modifiable, provisional. The modernist long poem in the improvisational mode attempts to both harness new energies and expand existing literary categories (hence the collage techniques engaged by Pound and even more overtly by William Carlos Williams), but also to reclaim the orality and improvisational sung/spoken presence of the epics like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (before they were written down).[17]

Since these modern long poems are typically not formally recited, much less sung, their typographical and publication history becomes an analogue for the performative improvisations of oral poetry. In most cases, these poems were published in different forms of different lengths throughout the poet's career, so that the "final form" was unknown to poet and reading audience alike. A short list of such modern long poems in the improvisational mode might include: *The Waste Land* (heavily edited and crafted by Pound, and notably a form that Eliot never really returned to as Marjorie Perloff has pointed out); Zukofsky's *A*, Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, and Charles Olsen's heavily Pound-indebted *Maxiumus Poems*.[18] Within this family of improvisational long poems, we can see Pound's poetry as part of a genealogy and an ongoing project to balance provisionality with concreteness, a genealogy that represents a tradition of improvisationally-based poetics not limited to Pound.

A biography and oeuvre as large and unwieldy as Pound's is difficult to tackle from one angle, let alone multiple perspectives. Yet because of Pound's consistent use of this improvisational mode, it will not suffice to view Pound as Poet or Pound as Composer or Pound as Fascist; we must attempt instead to view all of these characteristic modes as part of his larger self-consciously metamorphic process of being. We can analyze his literary and other written output for signs of this mode, and see that Pound's turn towards a long, ambiguously circumscribed poetic "form" such as the *Cantos* is one important example of his improvisational tendencies. Pound's contradictory traits are reflections of the vicissitudes, mistakes, dangers, risks, and triumphs of improvising a life's work.

Pound's improvisational mode is also paradoxically analogous to Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous experiments with fragments and constellations of meaning in his own work (such as *One-Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*). While I will not attempt a "Benjaminian" reading of Pound, if we pragmatically reread Pound and connect the liberatory impulses inherent (although

admittedly sometimes dormant) in his texts from the perspective of Benjamin's fragmentary historical materialism, we might potentially recover a fresher and richer understanding of the modernist period as well as a more interesting and nuanced view specifically of Pound's political, social, ethical, and aesthetic activities during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. It might even be said that Benjamin and Pound were working on an improvisational aesthetic of fragmentary writing from opposite ends: Benjamin from the Left and Pound from the Right. As I hope to show, Pound's use of improvisation inadvertently led his poetics—if not always his politics—into a more liberatory space than he might have intended.

In this more nuanced view of Pound, we can therefore see his subsequent influence via improvisational aesthetics, both in terms of the strengths of his poetics and the legacy he left for other poets, and in terms of the dangers of living a life so wildly at risk of going outside the rules—or sticking too closely to unnecessary or Fascistic rules. Navigating these two extremes—adhering too closely to or straying too far from conventional rules, laws, and boundaries—is one of the most important skills for successful improvisation. There is no improvisation without reference to structure, and the complicated history of Pound's life and work is the story of how and why Pound sought to create and break limits as he made art.

II. Fragments in the Vortex

Ezra Pound is often remembered for the poems and ideas of his Imagist period, where the *visual* elements of his figurative language were supposed to channel a "complex" of emotional associations.[19] Yet Pound's career as a writer was also always connected with poetry rooted in musical traditions, as his early and abiding interest in the Provençal troubadours demonstrates. Much has been made of Pound's use and misuse of Chinese, but perhaps his greatest mistake (which, as Hugh Kenner notes, Pound later realized) was missing the phonetic and sonic qualities of tonal Chinese while he searched for meaning in the written, visual, classical characters.[20] When he later focused his attention on the sound of Chinese, it resulted in a "translation" of the *Confucian Odes* into a wide swath of vernacular "Englishes." Notably, some of these poems employ the *Uncle Remus*-style dialect, which Pound would employ throughout his correspondence with T. S. Eliot, and we meet figures like "Hep-Cat Chung" and "yaller bird."[21] I will turn to the racial and racist dimensions of Pound's interest in black aesthetics later, but for now I want to point to the way in which these sorts of manipulations in character and voice direct the reader to the sound of the language. Unable to access the original Chinese, Pound makes his own songs. The sound of the words in each poem, the way Pound "did the voices" as he did so well in his editing of Eliot's *Waste Land,* was crucially important to making the poems work as the *songs* they gestured to in the original Chinese.

Thus even the predilection for the visual, particularly regarding Pound's view of the Chinese ideogram and its influence on imagism and his later poetic technique, was fundamentally linked with sound and music as much as it was with sight and writing/painting. As Bradley Bucknell points out in his welcome study of English literary modernism and music, "the case for a hard and fast split between the visual and the auditory in Pound's sense of imagism is difficult to make."[22] Bucknell here argues that Pound's pursuit of concrete, direct visual images is often obscured and even made mystical by the emotional "inwardness" of his musical and auditory procedures. Even in Pound's most famous imagist poem, "In a Station of the Metro," we see signs of this synesthesia:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.
>
> (287)

While this poem does not necessarily exhibit the same kinds of wordplay and other signs of aural experimentation that act as signs of "musicality" in writing, we do see the volatility—what Pound would later call the "vortex"—in the Poundian image. The faces are apparitions, already one-step removed from solid, physical reality (we might imagine the reflections of people in the windows of the subway cars). The metaphor of the poem then moves those faces-turned-ghosts onto rain-soaked petals, further mutating the solidity of the image, causing it to flicker like the ghostly faces it describes.

Pound himself noted of this image that "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."[23] Such inwardness is also a sign, as Brad Bucknell has recounted, of Pound's Romantic-musical inheritance, via Wagner, Pater, and Mallarme; figures who, despite their considerable differences, all posit music as representing something beyond language or writing: an invisible—and paradoxically for Mallarme, unheard—sign of the mystical, found in the emotional resonance of music.[24]

It is significant, then, that Pound's notion of the "image" and the "vortex" share the same kind semantic ambiguity that we find in music. His images are precise, but they are also mutable by virtue of their own vitality. Pound's focus on the image as a device for capturing moments of experience as they happen brings Imagism as a poetic technique into the domain of improvisation. The complexity of the "image complex," the mutability of the moments it tries to capture, thus necessarily create an analogously metamorphic verbal and visual space. The principles of the image, vortex, and finally the ideogram, all of which stemmed from Pound's interest in the poetic potential of Chinese, would eventually be combined into a shifting complex of sounds and images in the *Cantos*.

Throughout Pound's work we also find echoes of the Emersonian tradition of naming, of finding the exact Adamic word for each discrete thing, and, by virtue of *calling* each thing, of finding its "sound," being able to harness the power inherent in each thing. This power became lost amidst the greater chaos (but also aesthetic pleasure) of the post-Babel world with its multiple names for each thing in many languages. For Pound, such a world would require not only Chinese pictures but also Chinese sounds, and translations into modern English of those pictures and sounds, along with translations of *translations* into Greek and Latin among other languages, and even translations of ideas and words into actual music, to paradoxically make words and sounds become clear again.

Music, then, would provide the "structural device" for making all of this possible. Pound's primary life's work, the *Cantos*, was a poem that announced its presumed musicality in its title—as Margaret Fisher, an important chronicler of Pound's musical activities, points out: "Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, one of the twentieth-century's most influential poems, bears a title that should be translated as 'The Songs'—though it never is. Pound took his definition of poetry directly from Dante . . . but his ear kept returning to the earlier art of troubadour poetry, the art of 'motz el son' ['words fitted to music']."[25]

For a poet who is relatively unread in comparison to his famous friend, T. S. Eliot, a massive amount of critical commentary exists regarding Ezra Pound's work. And while there is a growing amount of interest in the musical dimensions of Pound's life and work, there is little analysis of how his musical aesthetics and his ethics are related. Bucknell's chapter on Pound remains one of the few attempts to tackle these issues. In summarizing the ultimate trajectory of Pound's musical pursuits, Bucknell states:

> The proliferation of writing in Pound, both in the *Cantos* and in his multitudinous books and articles, sustain his conceptions as further writing, but do not cross into the domain of ultimate revelation. Pound's use of music as a provisional model for his textual procedures in the *Cantos*, or further, as a way of conceiving, or explaining, or *asserting* an immanence in his text, and in the realm of politics, economics, etc. finally becomes part of the insistence of the text *as* writing—more of its surface. The text cannot finally exceed itself but only produce more and more of itself in a procedure of continual assertion and association. The result is a process of constant supplementarity that "music," in any of its various appearances, cannot stop, but of which it can only become a part.[26]

For Bucknell, Pound's use of music is evidence of a deep anxiety regarding the final legitimacy of his aesthetic, political and ethical claims made throughout the poetry, essays, radio speeches, and other Poundian production. Music in Pound falls victim not only to the unfulfillable demands that Pound makes on it—that is, to operate as a perfect medium for poetry (as in Troubadour and

other oral poetic traditions) and at the same time as a vehicle of transcendence—it also fails in the way that all attempts to "make poetry into music" fail.

As Eric Prieto reminds us, poetry can never "become" actual music, but can only ever be an analogy for something else that the writer desires.[27] Bucknell points to this same irony as it plays out in Canto 75, a famous example of music in Pound's poetry. Pound seemingly wants us to see and hear *actual* birds, and *actual* music in the form of a transcription of Jannequin's song collaged into the written text. But the "actuality" is always deferred, by the written language, by the musical transcription (instead of a live performance, or even a recording of the music), and by the inescapable fact that the music *itself* can only represent the "real" music of the birds. The birds and the music are never "there" in a tangible sense. In some ways my judgment of the improvisational aspects of Pound's work is grounded on the same basic understanding of his work. Pound's poetry "fails" precisely because he mistakes reality for Pound-ality; as Bucknell suggests, behind all claims for absolute truth, the only real authority for the meaning and relevance of that truth is Pound, who himself is highly contradictory and anxious in his expression of the supposed absolutes.[28] Music, then, becomes another "supplement," another space of deferral for the unfinished, incomplete, and ultimately unreachable absolute which Pound desired; and yet this unfinished and provisional status of even the supposedly transcendent medium of music is precisely what also connects Pound's musical and poetic thought to improvisation.

In a 1929 essay called "How to Read," Pound importantly outlines some of his ideas about music that had already been crucial to his work. He describes what he considered to be the three kinds of poetry, and the first of these categories he dubbed *melopoeia,* "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning."[29] In what might be a description of the sonic language of the *Cantos*, Pound goes on to state that, "In *melopoeia* we find a force tending often to lull, or to distract the reader from the exact sense of the language. It is poetry on the borders of music and music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe."[30]

This distinction was later developed in Pound's primer on reading and writing poetry, *ABC of Reading*, where he famously states that "Music rots when it gets *too far* from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music."[31] He then emphasizes that "There are three kinds of *melopoeia*, that is, verse made to sing; to chant or intone; and to speak. The older one gets the more one believes in the first."[32] It seems that Pound is, in these statements, at odds with his proclivity towards exactitude (a recurring topic in *ABC of Reading*, most notably in Pound's reference to the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish).[33] Yet what has become clear to Pound at the end of his most "musical" decade, the 1920s, is that music can indeed provide the basis for a clarity beyond literal meaning, beyond the specificity of one language, his version of that hackneyed metaphor of music being a "universal language."

Pound's poetry was now fully infused with music as both a metaphor for history and thought, as well as a structural device that would further influence the form of subsequent cantos. He was not "returning" to or focusing again on poetry, nor was he giving up on his experiments with "real music." Rather, his post-1920s work was now informed by and reinforced by his work with George Antheil, Olga Rudge, and the opera, radio plays, and other pieces he had created, as I will detail later. With his work in musical composition and performance, Pound felt justified to write the maxims in "How To Read" which declared:

> A man can learn more music by working on a Bach fugue until he can take it apart and put it together, than playing through ten dozen heterogeneous albums . . . [34]
>
> For practical contact with all past poetry that was actually *sung* in its own day I suggest that each dozen universities combine in employing a couple of singers who understand the meaning of the word . . . A half-dozen hours spent in listening to the lyrics actually performed would give the student more knowledge of that sort of *melopoeia* than a year's work, in philology.[35]

Yet here Pound is, as usual when he is the most assertive in his proclamations, only telling part of the truth: had he "taken apart a Bach fugue" and put it back together? Did he really understand the words to all the poems he wanted to hear in song, and did he know the proper music that accompanied them? Instead of really securing such knowledge, Pound made up his own theory on harmony, and composed his own music and rhythms for singing old verse. And perhaps, even after the strengths of these researches, he was still to admit in "How to Read" that, "for twenty-seven years I have thought consciously about this particular matter, and read or read at a great many books, and that with the subject never really out of my mind, I don't yet know half there is to know about *melopoeia*."[36]

Pound's *melopoeiaic* poetry itself would be his attempt at "bridging" the "consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe." The statements regarding *melopoeia* also demonstrate that for Pound, music and the music within language was not mere aesthetic preference, but approaching a mystical reverence for music much like the Romantics before him; and, in fact a reverence that many people for many centuries shared about the effects of music. The mixture of elements in his poetry—visual, linguistic, sonic, spatial—all begin to suggest a provisional, improvisational mode as the ideal "formless form" for Pound's particular style of free verse. Again, the typical critical response to this form has not employed the term "improvisation." R. Murray Schafer has noted that "the *Cantos* are said to lack form. Perhaps what they lack is the kind of form with which the literary critic is familiar."[37]

Bucknell posits that such a mysterious form is "discontinuous," and yet "it too has a logic, though this may well be a 'logic' of the non-rational and

the discontinuous."[38] Caroll Terrell's assessment is the most elaborately musical, yet still elides a mention of the improvisational mode:

> . . . a musical metaphor may be helpful in approaching both internal and overall design [of the *Cantos*]: Not a musical form such as a traditional symphony, concerto, or fugue, but a much larger conception which in music does not yet exist: perhaps a new kind of opera with a structure involving passacaglia, fugue, counterpoint, choral song, leitmotif, and musical figure; an opera entitled "The Tale of the Tribe" with a cast of hundreds performing in a range of rhythm and sound from plain talk, recitatif, and quiet repose to the most extraordinary lyric songs an arias and moments of crashing crescendo . . . [39]

The "new kind of opera" is Pound's improvisational mode, caught between the printed page and the movement of thought, sight, and sound. Through this form, Pound thought he was also revealing life with clarity; and here we see how living between music and writing for Pound was both a project about bringing language closer to music, as well as bringing his own sanity to the edge of reason. As Brad Bucknell states, "music" contributes to Pound's project of poetic clarity, what Bucknell calls the "writing of the real," but this complicates Pound's linguistic and semantic goals "insofar as [music] inexorably marks the provisionality of Pound's text *as* writing, and, therefore, as part of the supplemental struggle behind Pound's epistemological and poetic design."[40] Pound thus seems to be caught, in spite of himself, in a matrix of improvisational flux, a natural consequence of trying to capture the moments of the vortex as they happen.

I will now turn to a fuller analysis of Pound's poetry itself, focusing on the later cantos, to show the full extent to which not only music but specifically an improvisational "mode" of poetry became the focus of Pound's writing.

III. The Cantos and the End of Endings

The stakes in the *Cantos* are high. Among other goals, Pound attempts to right/write civilization by a transmutation of idiosyncratic luminous details from history and mystery into a mystical cure-all for his war-torn century. But as the poem and the years of Pound's increasingly harrowing life proceed (caused by his own increasingly bad judgment), he fusses more and more with the fact that his perfection, the crystal nugget of insight that the poem should provide, will not and possibly cannot happen. Consciously tracing a hero's journey, from the descent into the underworld in Canto 1 to the dark night of his own soul in the *Pisan Cantos,* Pound comes to a major turning point during the "Rock Drill" section of the poem.

Like the sharpness of the title, (which was an epithet for Pound coined by Wyndham Lewis), *Section: Rock Drill. 85–95 de Los Cantares* gets to the core of the matter when the narrator-hero-Pound discovers that if his version of

paradise and clarity cannot be attained on a social level, it can be potentially attained on a personal level.[41] In a section which contains Poundian rage alongside lyrical Poundian mysticism, we find the following sequence in Canto 92, the sequence with which I opened this chapter:

> Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel
> but is jagged,
> For a flash,
> for an hour
> Then agony,
> then an hour,
> then agony,
> Hilary stumbles, but the Divine Mind is abundant
> unceasing
> improvisatore
> Omniformis
> unstill
>
> (92.620)

The narrator has been listening to the sounds of the waves on the beach, and he comes to this humbling epiphany that paradise is not artificial, but "jagged." He sees this vision in snatches, sometimes for an hour, but like the jaggedness that life in reality is, not the serene paradise of the skies. It is a vision of the constant flow, sometimes violent flow of reality. Pound had noted years earlier in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* that "all things are a flowing/Sage Heracleitus says" (550). Life is motion and transformation, hence life witnessed in Canto 92 as the mind of God in constant thought, "abundant," "unceasing": the mind of improvisation. The frustration is for a time abated by the revelation that there is no stopping, no hard crystallization of perfection, but rather continuous being-in-time. As Pound's tutor in Chinese ideograms, Ernest Fenollosa, had imagined Chinese, everything is a verb; all is "a flowing."[42]

This is the lesson that Ezra Pound could never quite master, despite the fact that it is expressed throughout his poetry in one form or another. From the metamorphic space of the actual languages of the *Cantos* to the semantic content of that metamorphic language—that is, it is often a poem about things changing from one thing into another, even as Pound tries to make it a poem about making the good things last—the epic project of the *Cantos* is a lesson akin to the cliché that "change is the only thing that remains the same." The pursuit of this wisdom, however, proves to be a constant source of pain for Pound. Even in the moment (or hour, as he has it in Canto 92) of this revelation, he goes back and forth between vision and "agony." As Hugh Kenner states, the Herecleitian/Paterian "moments" which we might say Pound renamed and redefined as "luminous details," became increasingly hard to unite in the absolute way Pound desired: "He was to labor all his mature life to bring the Cantos into the domain of such intensities, and achieve the way of it finally . . . only when midway through his eighth decade the whole poem seemed to be falling

apart in his hands."[43] Yet it is this frustrated form of loose, drunken fluidity versus pristine, changeless vision gives the *Cantos* its particularly wide-open "form."

The long poem, for Pound, becomes the way to constantly reassess the problem of failed coherence. Some points of reference and influence for this stretched out, loose structure are clearly the epic poems of Homer, Old English poems like *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer* (the latter of which Pound translated), and others, but it is also the basis of other quasi-autobiographical long poems in English that have a similar history of provisionality, constant revision, and tension between closure and openness. The two central models here are Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.[44] Both of these long poems chart a history of indecision and revision of an individual consciousness as it meets history.

For Pound, this structure, however loosely defined, became the basis for most of his poetic activity after he began the poem in earnest in 1917.[45] The larger life of his written work also presents a version of a "long poem" in that it is built from fragments often repeating and varying the same themes. But in the *Cantos* we see these central themes in full focus all at once, as it were, and increasingly throughout the final few sections we see the drama of Pound's inability to "cohere" become the subject as well as the form of the poem itself.

By the start of Canto 93, we again see the Pound of the previous canto fretting away, but seemingly resting (for an hour?) on ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs translated as "A man's paradise is his good nature" (93.623). But therein lies the paradox plaguing Pound—how good is nature if it is constantly moving from good to bad to good and back ad infinitum? The lesson learned, the lesson forgotten. Mortal Hilary (according to Pound, the medieval mystic Hilary of Poitiers, but also perhaps a subject rhyme for a wandering Edmund Hillary) stumbles, but the Divine Mind is abundant.[46] Ironically, Pound has developed the perfect, elastic form to trace these wanderings; his long poem has become a collection of voices, a gathering of strange details that collide, collage, and transform with recurring themes cohering one another in incoherence.

The Divine Mind is an improviser, and, as Pound states in Canto 93, "holding that energy is near to benevolence" (93.629). The poem improvises itself into life and life improvises itself into the poem. The effect is not as dreamlike as Joyce's night for Finnegan, precisely because Pound wanted the crystal ball of the sun to illuminate life. What *is* illuminated is the very reality of the dream, the way in which things are and are not things, history is and is not the present or the future. Or rather the translation not of Life, but of Pound's life. A mistranslation? A bad improvisation? Or many improvisations, some workmanlike, some transcendent for an hour, some, as guitarist Derek Bailey has said of the site of improvisation, not making it out of the "muddy ditch."[47]

Pound would not be content "holding that energy" of life for only a moment, or an hour, in his mind or in his hand. Instead, he constantly and pedantically chastised both society—and rarely, but sometimes revealingly—himself for not being able to fully embrace the crystalline light of wisdom and compassion which was supposed to manifest itself in his poem. Yet he seems to realize this contradiction, despite his later attempts to make all "cohere," when at the end of Canto 93 he walks "up out of hell, from the labyrinth" and then asks: "Without guides, having nothing but courage / Shall audacity last into fortitude?" (93:632). And thus is Pound self-defined: a blindly courageous wanderer of unguided audacity, audacious enough to know that he's audacious.

Near the end of the last canto of "Rock Drill," the audaciousness turns to further realization. Pound states: "And there is something decent in the universe / if I can feel all this, dicto millesimo / At the age of whatever" (95.647). This jocular "whatever" is one of many moments in the later cantos where Pound seems content not to be as accurate in his wording or quotations as he has before, to let things slide a bit: even where he still desires clarity. For example, in Canto 98 where he quotes a Confucian text stating "that you should hear it unblurred," throughout the Canto he is meanwhile doing a Poundian portmanteau stage show with Chinese and English, blurring the hearing and the seeing of the text.[48]

The *Cantos* are a constant shuttling back and forth between surety and confusion, a comfort in change and a longing for stability. The poem is Pound's map for himself of what he thought would also help others; the bits and pieces of culture that would make everything okay. Yet the very fact that many of those bits and pieces were fragments of larger (sometimes often mistranslated and/or misunderstood) works, themselves often *about* the provisionality and fragmentary nature of life—the wanderings of Odysseus, the cycles of nature, the tenets of American democracy (in theory, at least, an ever-changing system)—serves to give only a provisional (and ultimately unfinished) structure to the *Cantos*. Additionally, the presence of Pound as the final authority regarding how all of these elements are related creates, as Bucknell has pointed out, a constant "supplementarity" to account for the meaning of each idea or ideogram: "The self-evident nature of the ideogram, in any form, is anything but self-evident, and can only be authorized by referral to Pound's other written insistences and arguments. (This is not to mention the mass of critical texts concerning Pound and his work)."[49] In other words, Pound's technique causes a need for more and more explanation and validation of each successive idea.[50]

The unfinished, Herecleitian flow that the poem assumes as its ultimate form becomes more and more "clear" towards the end of the poem, as I have noted in the above excerpts from the *Rock Drill* and the *Thrones* sections. By the time Pound published the final segments of the poem, *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII*, and *Fragments of Cantos* (which is technically missing cantos 98 and 99), the "formless form" was confirmed, down to the presence

of the word "fragments" in the title. Throughout the publication process, the poem had been conceived of not only as an ongoing long poem, but also a poem that could and would be changed periodically (even sections that had already been published).

Thus the fact that change was inscribed in the title of this last section, as well as the very first section (*A Draft of XXX Cantos*), links the beginning and end sections as points in the Jamesian stream-of-consciousness, recorded in poetic form by Pound. The language and the lines of the final sections become more and more clipped, and even in the *Thrones* section Pound's stated goal of presenting clear facts sometimes gives way to moments where it is obvious that either his memory is failing him, or he is too tired to look up the exact name or date of a historical example—"'or civilization' said Monsieur Bonaparte, / at least I think it was Bonaparte"—*or* he is too furiously at work on getting through to the next line, the next canto, the end in sight (97.680).

Pound even quotes an earlier fragmented ending, from the famous conclusion of a poem that ironically should have taught readers how to read his own fractured lines: the end of Eliot's *Waste Land*. In Canto 110 we read: "From time's wreckage shored, / these fragments shored against ruin" (110.781). Here it is as if Pound were trying to both lament the loss of Vorticist potential in 1913 and to "re-shore" those same fragments again, Eliot now dead and having long-since foreclosed on his own radical poetics that Pound so importantly helped to shape and expose to the world. This task is what Kenner suggests is at the ghostly heart of Pound's "era"—reconciling the promise of the pre-World War One years with the subsequent horrors. [51]

These elegiac moments are not new to the poem, and have been present since at least the opening lines of the *Pisan Cantos*, if not earlier. Yet what makes these moments interesting is that despite their sense of loss and longing to "go back" or remain in the melancholic space of memory, Pound almost always goes on—in an almost Beckettian sense of stubbornness: "I can't go on. I'll go on." As I will detail later, Wallace Stevens faced a similar challenge in his poetic transformations of a tragic world. Everywhere there is resting, but then motion again, like the bird flying from point to point or the river we step into again and again that is always the same but always different—Jamesian and Heracleitian images—Pound's poem can't stop going.

In Canto 113, there is a brief stop in this river: ". . . and to think what has been shall be, flowing, ever-unstill"—a seemingly tranquil moment where the rhetoric "rests" even as it describes motion—and this motion is immediately confirmed in the next line where we see "a partridge-shaped cloud over a dust storm" (113.787). Pound's metamorphic imagery—not only a cloud but a cloud-colored-by-human-imagination, turned into a bird—shapes the motion and makes motion within motion, a cloud turned into bird, cloud-bird whirling over dust storm. Similarly, we then get the fatalistic lines stating that "The

hells move in cycles, / no man can see his own end" and the pronouncement that "The Gods have not returned" (ibid.). Yet immediately we perceive that "the air moves with their living" (ibid.). The canto ends with a similarly restless worldview: "Out of dark, thou Father Helios, leadest / but the mind as Ixion, unstill, ever-turning" (113.790).

It is as if in these later cantos, Pound's mind is still working even though he wants it to stop, a sign perhaps manifested as he entered his well-documented period of near-complete literal silence starting in 1960.[52] If the "Ixion-mind"—presumably "bad," hence Ixion's punishment in Tartarus—cannot rest on earth, at the expense of the "Helios-mind," or light of intelligence and wisdom that Pound seeks to confirm in his poems, then what else to do but seek silence and possibly even the sleep of death?

But there are still other poems to be written. And so Pound continues, with a canto that includes references to his genealogy, a reminiscence of the old times and the old Pound family ways, wherein he stops to wonder: "are we to write a genealogy of the demons?" (114.793). His own demons still pursuing him, he muses: "To reign, to dance in a maze, / To live a thousand years in a wink. / York State or Paris– / Nor began nor ends anything" (ibid.). "Nor began nor ends anything," even as the poem and Pound's life are coming to a close. And if Pound were flirting with the idea of stopping, of trying to bask in the light—or in failure—rather than remaining in the unstill wonder of life, he reminds us in Canto 115 that "Wyndham Lewis chose blindness / rather than have his mind stop" (115.794). Lewis would keep working, keep going, keep writing despite or *because of* the literal "blind faith" that you must.

Thus the final cantos rehearse a drama of constant change, a cycle of Pound's "failure to cohere" contrasted with either a resolve or a distant faith that if the poem itself didn't work, at least the ideas were right. This sentiment is expressed in Canto 116, as Pound states "it coheres all right/even if my notes do not cohere" (116.797). Here Pound unwittingly puns on his musical predilections and echoes Wallace Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*: the written, as well as the musical notes, have become dissonant, producing no harmony. Yet for a poet so against literal musical harmony, as I will detail later, this should be an asset. Friends and sympathetic critics tried to argue as much, even though Pound was known to say in conversation that the poem was "a botch."[53] Carpenter states that "The Cantos are a botch, but they do have unity and coherence, for they are autobiography."[54] Carol Terrell claims that, "the fragmentary end of the poem is no accident caused by the poet's failing powers but a matter of deliberate design which reflects with the nicest of art the fragmentary, uncohesive, human condition in the 20th century which worsened into the years of the cold war."[55]

The "end" of the *Cantos*, then, can be read as a sign of the poem's continued ability to chart the fluid, mutable images of the vortex. Yet like Wallace Stevens's deathbed poem, *Of Mere Being*, the fragment that closes the standard

published edition of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* does give some sense of pause, the poet's literal ending in death providing the reader a moment for reflection. Pound's Canto 120 in fact asks forgiveness:

> I have tried to write Paradise
> Do not move
> Let the wind speak
> that is paradise.
> Let the Gods forgive what I
> have made
> Let those I love try to forgive
> what I have made.
>
> (120.803)

The wind "speaking" offers a final image combining the semantic specificity of language with the ambiguity of non-linguistic sounds, found throughout the *Cantos*: music, the sounds of birds, and now, the wind blowing. After hundreds of pages of poetry, we are offered the wind's words/sounds of wisdom. Unable to capture life with language, unable to *write* Paradise, Pound gestures again to the realm of sound, the realm beyond language, for a confirmation of truth. Like the apparitions in the metro, this last Poundian image combines the "complex" of the written word with a moving, fleeting vision, escaping the words that try to pin it down. The poem's "illogical logic" is blowing in the wind.

But perhaps Pound's friend, and self-proclaimed improviser, William Carlos Williams, sums up Pound's own, as Pound might say, *virtu*: Williams "once said he believed that Ezra's mistakes were a crucial part of his achievement: 'He doesn't know a damn thing about China . . . That's what makes him an expert. He knows nothing about music, being tone deaf. That's what makes him a musician . . . And he's batty in the head. That's what makes him a philosopher.'"[56] While this humorous, but in some ways accurate description of Pound implicitly condones the more dangerous and offensive of Pound's mistakes, it does capitalize on the notion that Pound's failures were often creative ones, generating the material for future poets to either emulate or be warned by. "This is not a work of fiction," says Pound in Canto 99, "nor yet of one man (99.708). It is left to the pragmatic reader to assemble the fragments.

In the end, the "Complete" *Cantos*, which have as of now been published with at least three different "endings," are still being recycled and remixed (Charles Bernstein has compared Pound's collage technique to "sampling"), as a recent critical edition of the *Pisan Cantos* demonstrates.[57] While it will probably never gain the critical or popular appeal of similarly difficult but implicitly less politically and ethically troubling modernist works like Joyce's novels, or even *The Waste Land*, it stands to reason that by virtue of its modular, provisional structure, the *Cantos* will continue to be read in one fragmentary form or another: an appropriate destiny for a poem charting the problems with completion and the absolute.

Pound's Life in/and Music

I. The Pound Sound

> *For a TV sound track a group called The Improved Sound Ltd. elicited from part of his 1920 Villon the vigors proper to 1969, drums and rhythms and quasi-Arab admixtures; German papers referred wonderingly to the Pound Sound.*
>
> *Hugh Kenner,* The Pound Era

For the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss Pound's "actual" musical activities as a performer, music critic, and composer, in order to further illuminate the improvisational nature of his poetry. While there has long been an interest in Pound's musical pursuits, demonstrated most notably in the collection of his music criticism and theoretical writings on music edited and annotated by R. Murray Schafer, I will analyze Pound's musical life in relation to contemporaneous African-American aesthetic forms, as opposed to the standard connections made between his music and Western art classical music. As recent essays in the volume *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism* attest to, insight into Pound's relationship with African-American culture is crucial to understanding his career. Yet unlike most of those essays, as well as Michael North's important work elucidating the linguistic dimensions of Pound's fascination with black speech, I will focus on the musical aspects of Pound's life and their sometimes contradictory connections with black aesthetics.[58]

Pound's education as a musician began relatively late in his life, compared to his education and practice in writing poetry. R. Murray Schafer reminds us that "A poet's attitude to music will be conditioned by his profession. He will come at music through the word"; hence much of Pound's initial interest in music was limited to writing *about* it, or writing poetry that attempted to capture the style of earlier oral- and music-poetic traditions, rather than performing music.[59] Biographer Humphrey Carpenter notes that Pound's mother's "attempts to teach him to play the piano had failed, but he would lose no opportunity to sit down at the key [sic]"—and, as friend William Carlos Williams states—"let fly for us—seriously . . . Everything, you might say, resulted except music. [Pound] took mastership at one leap: played Liszt, Chopin—or anyone else you could name—up and down the scales, coherently to his own mind, any old sequence. It was part of his confidence in himself."[60]

Later, when he made the friendship of several famous pianists, he was reportedly scolded by German concert pianist Walter Morse Rummel; the incident is here described by Richard Aldington: " . . . by way of passing time Ezra started playing Debussy with one finger on the open grand piano. Suddenly Rummel, dressed only in his underclothes, rushed furiously in, shouting: 'Ezra! Ezra! Ezra! If you touch that piano once more I'll throw you out the window!' "[61] In fact Pound never gained any real training in either the performance of or composition of music, and like much else in his life, was essentially

an autodidact, maintaining that he knew the "real stuff" even as his ignorance was obvious to the trained professional. He nevertheless retained a knack for musicality in his verse and was able to compose, with the help of professionals like George Antheil, music that was interesting and competent.

R. Murray Schafer has even informed me that when he visited Pound in Rapallo, the aging poet could still sing all of the parts to his opera, *Le Testament*.[62] For all of his idiosyncratic musical knowledge, Schafer seemed to suggest, Pound really did have *knowledge*, and he used it to craft memorable music. Furthermore, the fact that Pound was able to hear the music in his head and translate it to his voice indicates that he was "composing" music like most people in the world have traditionally done; that is, he "wrote" it aurally—making it closer to the improvised music practices that even Western art music itself historically engaged with.[63] Virgil Thomson, who would collaborate frequently with Gertrude Stein, said of Pound's music that "it may be the finest poet's music since Thomas Campion . . . and its sound has remained in my memory."[64]

In 1914 Pound had met the musician, instrument maker, and Early Music-revivalist Arnold Dolmetsch, and bought from him a clavichord, one of the early keyboard instruments that was a precursor—albeit differently tuned—to the pianoforte which Pound came to frequently castigate and dismissively dub the "pye-ano."[65] Part of Pound's dislike for the piano probably stemmed from his inability to actually play it, but the aesthetic grounds for his antipathy are nevertheless coherent and important to understanding his overall musical outlook, as I will detail in greater depth later.

Pound's interest in the rhythmic, as opposed to the harmonic aspects, of music might also be tied to his self-acknowledged poor singing voice. In a 1920 letter to Joyce (who was a good singer) he playfully states that "I have the organ of a tree toad, fortunately, for if I had been able ever to sing 'My Country tiz of thee' without going off the key four times in each bar, I shd. have warbled & done no bloomin' thing else—che peccato & wot a loss to litterchure."[66] Similarly, Yeats (who also had a terrible singing voice) reported early on in his friendship with Pound that "[Pound] can't sing as he has no voice. It is like something on a very bad phonograph."[67] The lack of a good singing voice was something that Pound shared with his sometime correspondent, Langston Hughes, as well as his mentor Yeats. All three of these poets might have been further fascinated by music, then, due to their lack of technical proficiency. But Pound nevertheless went further than most other musically-minded modernist poets by actually writing and playing music.

Two important exceptions to Pound's dislike of the piano were his friendship with the aforementioned Rummel (with whom he published a book of Troubadour lyrics and music) and with concert pianist Katherine Ruth Heyman, whom he first met in 1904. It was perhaps Heyman's unique approach to the piano that would create such passion in Pound against the instrument—after hearing her, and for a short while becoming her tour manager, Pound most

likely compared subsequent pianists against the talented Heyman. After hearing her, he perhaps perceived that most pianists had little to offer. Ironically, Heyman mocked Pound's later enthusiasm for George Antheil's music by advising him not to "make a mountain out of an antheil."[68]

Yet Heyman was equally adventurous in her aesthetics, championing the music of Charles Ives, and helping to popularize the work of the mystical Russian composer and pianist Alexander Scriabin through her many concerts in the inter-war years. Like Pound, she had an interest in non-Anglo cultures, including Native American music; she was even a dabbler in Zen Buddhism. She also described the way in which she took joy in improvisation as an young pianist, and proclaimed that "*playing* was always ecstatic, sometimes with my concentration vanishing into a dream and . . . vision. Let me say here that I never got what I was looking for in studying with anybody. What the artist seeks comes in a flash, a gleam, an intuition, an unexpected motion, an inner revelation of tone or phrase, when he is working alone on his own."[69] There is even an account of a performance where, in order to be heard over the orchestra, Heyman "played the concluding ascending arpeggios with the palms of her hands . . . anticipating Ornstein, Ginastera, Stockhausen."[70] The piano, perhaps the most Westernized of all instruments (having been created to accommodate modern Western harmony) ironically became, in the hands of innovative performers, a driving force to change static music; yet the dominance of the instrument made Pound seek out alternative timbres in his own music.

Despite his lack of formal training, then, Ezra Pound as a musician and composer was proficient enough to elicit the attention of the music world. He was dealing with similar avant-garde concerns, filtered through his earlier study in oral and musical poetic traditions. Pound wanted a poetry and a sound that was new and old at once. Pound was familiar with most, and friendly with many of the famous modernist Parisian music circle (and the writers they collaborated with), including Eric Satie and Jean Cocteau. It is interesting to note that while Pound's contemporary, Wallace Stevens, was perhaps more radical in his poetic rhetoric regarding music, he was much less radical in his actual musical tastes than Pound; not coincidentally, Stevens's favorite instrument was the piano.[71]

By the early 1920s Pound was composing his own music and occasionally even performing on drums, a feature of his musical career that I will discuss below. He also toyed around on a bassoon, and according to Louis Zukofsky, eventually learned to play his clavichord "very fluidly."[72] As he wrote frequent concert reviews for various periodicals under the pseudonym "William Atheling," he was also working on his own body of musical compositions, and, as with most of his enthusiasms, he created a canon of performers, composers, and genres of music that qualified as valid in the Pound world. The two central figures in Pound's musical world were his longtime mistress, violinist Olga Rudge, and the then-fledging American composer making a name for himself in Paris, George Antheil.

Both Rudge and Pound helped Antheil perform and promote his works and expose him to the transatlantic art-music world. But while Rudge might have shared Pound's interest in so-called Early Music (European music from the pre-Baroque era) and lesser known composers (in the 1920s, that is) like Vivaldi, it was Antheil the composer and polemicist for modern music, who truly sparked Pound's imagination and provided him with both technical assistance in writing music as well as the philosophical influence to regard African, African-American, and other non-Western musical cultures as crucial touchstones for a Poundian musical aesthetic. Antheil and Pound's artistic relationship flourished for a few short years between 1923–1926, but Antheil's ideas remained important to Pound throughout his life.

Pound knew and admired Stravinsky, but eventually fell into an uneasy polemical relationship with him due to Pound's relationship with Antheil. Most of the conflict between Antheil and Stravinsky resulted not from any real musical differences, but rather from Antheil's "anxiety of influence," so to speak, regarding the Russian composer's domination of the avant-garde 'teens. Antheil came to Europe in 1922 and quickly became the self-proclaimed "bad boy of music," the appellation that would later become the title of his autobiography. Antheil wanted to shock the concert-going world of Europe, but he also wanted to be respected as a serious performer and musician. While he later went on to become very successful upon his return to the States, it was due to his film composing in Hollywood, and not his "art music" (two categories which he himself never held at odds).

Until relatively recently, Antheil has been known more by his self-perpetuated reputation than by performance of his works. The most (in)famous was *Ballet Mécanique*, which as the title suggests, included mechanized instrumentation (player pianos, airplane propellers, and electric bells) and heavy percussion.[73] In Pound's most pivotal musical years (the 1920s), when he was most active as a performer and composer, Antheil provided both influence on and confirmation of Pound's own ideas about music. Later, the two men would be divided by an ocean and by World War Two, but in the youthful days of inter-war Paris, Antheil fell for the influential poet's praises. He later stated with regret that "Nobody could have been a tenth as good as Ezra made me."[74]

In what is essentially an excuse for Antheil to advocate for his own sphere of musical influence as much as an appraisal of Pound's music, the composer's article *Why A Poet Quit the Muses* (originally published in *The Chicago Tribune* September 14, 1924) expresses an interesting take on Pound's particular musical qualities. These qualities reflect the same rhetoric that Antheil uses in his later descriptions of African and African-American music. Antheil wrote the piece presumably to both defend Pound's 1923 opera, *Le Testament,* from critics but also to praise his own aesthetic in the face of what he characteristically and mockingly describes as the dying, "twiddledee" and "twiddledum" art of Picasso and Stravinsky.[75]

What is striking about this essay is that despite the fact that Antheil frequently dubs Pound's aesthetic as "medieval," it is precisely the directness and rhythmic force of this so-called medieval aesthetic that makes Pound's music both timeless and essentially modern. Antheil states that: "[Pound] seems the only man of the age who has started out writing music round so that there is air behind it . . . Pound's music, coming as it has, from a technically untrained musical talent that has been festering to express itself in real music all of his life, is a phenomenon existing outside of our sphere of music for some time yet to come."[76]

The point here is to recall that the "medieval" qualities of the music (which are certainly more definable in a stylistic way than Antheil's vague adjective of "round" music) do not make the music sound *old*. Just like Pound's parody of one of the oldest surviving Middle English song texts, "Sumer is Icummen In," which he titled *Ancient Music*, Pound's take on the past is always a revision to suit the times—and language—at hand: "Winter is icummen in, / Lhude sing Goddamm" (293).

Pound's study of ancient and modern cultures was guided by an eye and a mind attuned to idiosyncratic homologies in different eras, which might be combined into one big resonating "acorn of light" to make something socially and aesthetically effective. As Pound states in a passage quoted by Larry Lyall in an article about *Le Testament*, he was interested in "what sort of things endure, and what sort of things are transient; what sort of things recur . . . the forces, constructive and dispersive, of social order . . . what rules and axioms hold firm and what sort fade and what sort are durable but permutable."[77] The concept of "durable but permutable" reminds us of Pound's formulation regarding an image, that it be a "complex" capturing the movements of the "inward" and "outward" life.

Additionally, the general modernist impulse to primitivize other cultures often meant that the "past" was actually a synonym for a foreign country, not necessarily something that was temporally distant. Pound's work tries to pull these resonances from past and present cultures together in one continuous line of "luminous details," and therefore the musical sound of his "medieval music" is strikingly different from any historically identifiable sound-scape. Part of this, as Antheil gently suggests in the above quote, is because Pound was formally untrained as a musician and composer. But it is also due to Pound's own interests in what he thought would make music and poetry relevant, features which happened to be historically absent in most Western art music for most of the nineteenth century. Specifically, he was interested in a clearly delineated rhythmic setting for words that did not adhere blindly to "the metronome" (as he notes in his earlier rules for Imagism) and which would thus create a foregrounded melodic, as opposed to harmonic, emphasis in the music. These two features, basically a focus on rhythm and melody, had in some cases been de-emphasized in Western art music as Pound began his

artistic career; instead, the focus on novel harmonies and the use of the orchestra as a tool for impressionist combinations was typical, as in the music of Debussy.

There is another reason for Pound's interest in music, per se, that drove him to also eventually compose. As music critic Charles Shere noted in a review of the first recording of Pound's opera in 1972:

> Pound's musical researches did not proceed apart from his poetic work: indeed they were grounded in the interest he had in the poetry of the Middle Ages, which is inseparable from the music to which that verse was set. But beyond that, it's quite likely that music offered a structural aesthetic which made the revolutionary method of Pound's poetry—especially the later "Cantos"—possible, by freeing his thought from the linear, teleological style prevalent in expository (and even speculative) writing since the Renaissance.[78]

Shere later remarks, much like Antheil had done almost 50 years earlier, that Pound's opera "is immensely satisfying. An entirely new kind of music theater results; one with affinities for the music of the Middle Ages, but strong with the vigor of an individual style."[79] Again, here the emphasis is on the old, but with a sense of modernist innovation that is less about looking backward than it is a breaking out of time and epochs into something and somewhere new. Like his *Cantos*, Pound's musical works reflect an attempt to combine old and new forms and ideas (and languages) into a Poundian aesthetic of affinities. These musical features, as Shere suggests, also serve as an alternative "structural aesthetic" which would feature prominently in Pound's poetry throughout his life, and which reflect Pound's attitudes towards musical and historical time.

II. The Beat of a Different Drummer: Pound in and out of Time

> *If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far-away.*
>
> *Henry David Thoreau,* Walden

> *If a poet were, like a drummer, a man who makes rhythms, this would be very well: but a poet is under the obligation of making poems, and no other activity from him will do.*
>
> *Paul Fussell*

Understanding Pound's conception of historical time and rhythm is fundamental to understanding his conception of musico-poetic time and rhythm. Pound's attitude towards history might be best summed up in a phrase he wrote in 1934: "It is quite obvious that we do not all of us inhabit the same

time."[80] This sentiment provides an apt literal and metaphorical frame in which to see Pound's relationship to time, and hence to those processes shaped by time: rhythm, poetry, music, and history. We might expand on Pound's statement to include the idea that each of us, from moment to moment, inhabits a different time and space from the last moment. For Pound, thought itself is a process of change, both within and between individual consciousnesses. Time moves *metaphorically*, as in the way past and present are brought into relation with one another during an encounter with an aesthetic object, but time seems to also move *literally*, when we move through time. Even as early as 1908, Pound had been described as "nothing but a nomad" by Hilda Doolittle's father, and was always more of a literal "Nomad Exquisite" than Wallace Stevens.[81] Movement and change, along with his pursuit of absolute totality and Fascist stasis, became central in Pound's life and work.

Throughout his work, Pound self-consciously sought to unite the past and the present into a coherent whole, where, for example the aesthetics and values of Jeffersonian America and ancient China could be united with a social credit-infused American West or a Vortex-ed London. When he looked at stones and ruins in Italy, he claimed to see the histories of the people who had hewn the stone and the poets who wrote the histories.[82]

Pound's history became a self-selected cycle of points and lines of connection between those points, a rhythm of forms and people repeating and varying ideas and moral choices through time. Bucknell points out that this disjunct nonlinear version of history is how Pound perceived reality and "the process of knowing itself."[83] Pound hinges his poetic techniques on the fact that, as he states in *Guide to Kulchur* "We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence. It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with dates pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time."[84]

Hugh Kenner suggests that Pound's attitude towards history was itself the product of historical forces beyond his control. Kenner states that, for a whole generation of important Anglo-Modernists, World War One sealed the deal on the subsequent trajectory of their work: "Their destiny [Joyce, Lewis, Pound, Eliot] should have been to people the Vortex. Instead it was to maintain continuity. Civilization is memory, and after 1918 effective memory was almost lost."[85]

For Pound, then, maintaining continuity became a process of assembling fragments which might be united into a new Utopian whole, if only the poet could get it correctly organized and if the public would listen (and read). Starting most obviously with his editorial duties for Eliot's *Waste Land*, Pound himself "shored these fragments against ruins" for much of his life; but with an important difference from Eliot: While Eliot became increasingly conservative, his poetic technique became less radical than his early work which Pound was often indirectly or directly involved with.[86] Pound, on the other hand, with his rationale behind a fragmentary poetry being that it reflects the fragmentary nature of consciousness, made poetry which was filled with a collage

of languages, pictorial symbols, musical notation, and disruptive rhetorical and spatial techniques.

While Kenner suggests that such poetry was Pound's method of "maintaining continuity," Bucknell, in his assessment of the *Cantos,* argues that instead Pound was writing a poetics of "contiguity," where the fragments were in fact neither metaphorically or literally continuous.[87] That is, in his use of typographical spacing, for example, it is often hard to tell how to read a page of the poem, since the usual cues of line after line, page after page are displaced by a collage of symbols that could potentially be interpreted and read in time in a number of ways. This actual spatial fragmentation is further intensified by rhetorical and metaphorical fragmentation, in terms of the seemingly disconnected elements that form Pound's matrix of "luminous details"; this fragmentation occurs as early as the end of Canto I when the voice of Odysseus-Pound suddenly cuts to a more direct, modern-sounding tone: "Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is, Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer" (1.5).

So it may be that Pound's fragmentary technique—his interest in the vibrations of the "image," later transformed into the "vortex," which gave way finally to the "ideogrammatic method"—was brought on by the vicissitudes of keeping alive the memory, the dreams of life before 1914. But there is another way to account for these techniques that connect them to music and improvisation. Pound imagined himself from his earliest days as a bard figure who could recount these disjunct histories in musical verse. "I am the tongue and the brain / I am the song and the thought / I am the voice of the people / And I as myself am not,"[88] ran an early poem, and later he would portray himself as a wandering Odysseus propitiating the dead, *in media res,* Canto 1:

> And then went down to ship
> Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
> We set up mast and sail on that swart ship
> [. . .]
> And drawing sword from my hip
> I dug the ell-square pitkin;
> Poured we libations unto each the dead . . .
>
> (1.3)

His penchant for taking on masks—*Personae* was the title of an early volume of his work—was, since it was rooted so strongly in the sound of language, importantly a matter of taking on the *voice* as much as the image or face of historical figures and imaginary characters. These were the voices of the epic, and chiefly the Homeric Epic which even in its archetypal written form comes to us ultimately in fragments, metaphorically representing the endless nature of the oral poetic mode, the "Formulaic Homer" of Lord and Parry which became the standard for our era's Homer.[89] For Pound, this epic of multiple voices was importantly passed on to American poets via Walt Whitman. Whitman, as Pastras has detailed, is perhaps the chief American

exponent of the improvisational catalog, a technique which Pound would also draw on for his own epic poem.[90]

Pound's history, with its resonant voices reverberating through the pages of old and new texts, was not a chronology but a chorus, carried along on not by a timeline, but a tempo that increased or decreased as the connections were made more or less intense. These connections were in some senses always tenuous to any outsider, and thus the voices might sound less harmonious (Pound never being a fan of harmony in any case) than cacophonous, especially during the nadir of the chorus—Pound's Rome Radio broadcasts during World War Two.[91]

Pound ventriloquized and transformed voices, creating signature talk and song along the way. His "redneck voice" became standard fare when writing to his correspondents, a weird, anachronistic collage of misspellings and folk idioms possibly inspired by the fact that Pound rarely saw or heard America for most of his life after departing for Europe in 1908, even when he was in the nation's capital in an insane asylum.[92] Lacking exposure to America's sound, Pound made up his own version of a homespun dialect. Wyndham Lewis said of the Pound personae, "Pound is that curious thing, a person without a trace of originality of any sort . . . Yet when he can get into the skin of somebody else . . . he becomes a lion or a lynx on the spot."[93]

And yet the sum total of all of Pound's masks and voices made him intensely original and idiosyncratic, so much so that he was misunderstood by many or rather understood to be many different things to many people. He was figuratively, and as is detailed below, sometimes literally a different drummer making rhythms that were familiar and strange at once. His sense of time, both in terms of history and narrative, as well as his poetic tempi and meter, were his alone, precisely because he combined a convoluted, cyclical sort of history into a *vers libre* that was often self-consciously musical. In the metamorphic space of Pound's poetry, his advice to "make it new" thus aligns with Wallace Stevens's rule stating that the "it" of poetry, of the "supreme fiction" created through poetry "must change."

While some of Pound's major work in music resulted in the revival of older Western Art music that had been forgotten (most importantly, Vivaldi), his opinions on music—specifically in terms of his preference for rhythm and melody versus harmony—reflected not only the experiments of Western Art composers but also in many cases (certainly in the case of his collaborator George Antheil's ideas about music) the underlying influence on many of those experiments: developments in African-American vernacular music that would eventually be called jazz. The way in which jazztime was different—encapsulated in the very name of the early jazz style "ragtime"—was one of the fundamental shocks to the system of Western Art music in the early twentieth century. Hugh Kenner makes much of the fact that Pound's formative years coincided with major developments in the sciences and hence in the way humans perceive time and memory.[94] Like such developments, which Kenner

connects to Bergsonian philosophy, advances in Homeric archeology, and the discovery of the Las Gaux cave paintings, jazz rhythm transformed time.

The focus on rhythm in jazz brought new attention to an old element that was part and parcel of *poetry* but had been pushed aside in Western art music for many decades. Consider the shift in time and memory brought on by new ideas in physics, history, geology, etc. in relation to the following statement by Pound from his most significant work on music, *A Treatise on Harmony*. Regarding "the early students of harmony" he states that: "They thought of music as traveling rhythm going through points or barriers of pitch and pitch-combinations . . . They had this concept in their blood, as the oriental has his raga and his tala. It simply never occurred to them that people would start with static harmony and stick it in that stationary position."[95]

While this assertion refers to Pound's imagination of "Early" or "Ancient" music, we must remember that for Pound (to borrow from his contemporary and fellow time-bending peer, William Faulkner) the past isn't even past. In this case, the (Anglo-) Westerner, beset and bewildered by centuries of fooling around with harmony, need only look to the "living traditions" of Oriental and African music to see and hear "music as traveling rhythm."

Affirming this notion later in the *Treatise,* Pound states that "the Negroes in darkest Africa are probably right when they say that from simple beating of their drums they can imagine other instruments."[96] While the primitivist rhetoric indicates a "simplicity" to the "beating of drums," it also implies the *sophistication* of the drumming as music, music untouched by a predilection for Western harmony that Pound despised. Pound had detailed his fascination with rhythm as early as 1910, as described in the following passage from an the introduction to *The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*:

> Rhythm is perhaps the most primal of all things known to us. It is basic in poetry and music mutually, their melodies depending on a variation of tone quality and of pitch respectively, as is commonly said, but if we look closely we will see that music is, by further analysis, pure rhythm; rhythm and nothing else, for the variation in pitch is the variation in rhythms of individual notes, and harmony the blending of these varied rhythms. When we know more of overtones we will see that the tempo of every masterpiece is absolute, and is exactly set by some further law of rhythmic accord. Whence it should be possible to show that any given rhythm implies about it a complete musical form—fugue, sonata, I cannot say what form, but a form, perfect, complete. *Ergo*, the rhythm set in a line of poetry connotes its symphony, which, had we a little more skill, we could score for orchestra. *Sequiter*, or rather *inest*: the rhythm of any poetic line corresponds to emotion . . . It is the poet's business that this correspondence be exact.[97]

Ironically, it is the combined timbre of drums "in darkest Africa," which in many African drumming traditions are indeed tuned to exact pitches, that creates a "harmony of rhythm" so to speak, for Pound's perfect music; a harmony made manifest not through what Pound might characterize as the impressionistic

wash of sound of an orchestra, but rather a harmony tied to rhythm. For Pound's ear, this "rhythmic harmony" would therefore be more pointed, direct, and intensely emotional.

Here it is notable that Pound could be much more lucid about African music in a general sense than most other white commentators or musicians of the time. His primitivistic rhetoric, and a lack of actual aural or theoretical knowledge of most of the non-Western music he discusses, made it easy for Pound to be enthusiastic about non-Western sounds made by non-Anglo peoples, but the same distance and lack of knowledge in other commentators often resulted in an active hatred of similar music. Pound's seemingly throwaway quips about the correctness of "Negroes in darkest Africa" are actually part of a pattern in his musical thought regarding rhythm and the correct structure of music. Pound, as Aldon Nielsen has importantly remarked, was like all racists a "complicated racist," but it is significant that he held such views on African music at a time when that same music was considered mere (or sometimes dangerous) noise.[98]

It is difficult to say whether Pound's focus on historical time inspired his interest in poetic and musical time or vice versa, yet it is clear that the two emphases mingled throughout his work from his first published poetry to his final *Cantos*. Kenner recounts that, towards the end of Pound's life:

> More and more a web of silent rhythms held Ezra Pound's ear, as though he was no longer noticing the voices around him. He told a friend that the Cantos would end with everything caught up into music. Long ago in Paris, absorbed for a time in music, he had been rumored to have given up language. Now he had the Dolmetsch clavichord repaired, and in the tower room the strange sound, half humming, half singing, he was accustomed to make while he gestated verse—soldiers in Pisa had remarked it.[99]

Ezra Pound was a man intent on finding the meaning of words, the moral and ethical force of a given phrase. Yet for all his focus on the meaning of his often idiosyncratic "luminous details" filling his poetry, the sheer volume (pun intended) of words and phrases in multiple languages seemed to drown out, or even be the point of, his poetic project—as if the humming described by Kenner had become transformed into the poem itself, a murmur, a song, lines of sound threatening to become unhinged from the language that bound them to specific meaning. It is this performative, sonic aspect of Pound's compositional process—"performed," apparently, even when Pound was alone—that perhaps most directly exhibits the improvisational qualities of his work.

Kenner's anecdote is one of many accounts of the way rhythm and sound were embodied by Pound, and demonstrates how the *process* of writing, the activity of writing—what Pastras calls the *discipline* of improvisation—was not only expressed in Pound's poems metaphorically through his various bard/poet personae, but also in the sheer physicality of his writing practice.

James Laughlin, Pound's longtime publisher at New Directions, claims that Pound composed the length of his lines based on the length of the typewriter carriage, much like Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody." Laughlin notes that:

> [Pound] would assault his typewriter with an incredible vigor. In fact, he had to have two typewriters, because one was always at the repair shop. His typing, which was extremely eccentric, had, I think, a good deal to do with the visual arrangement of some of the pages in the *Cantos* because, in the fury of composition, he couldn't always take time to go all the way back to the left margin; he would slap the carriage and wherever it stopped that determined the indent.[100]

Truman Capote famously dismissed Kerouac's writing as mere "typing."[101] Viewing the process of writing from an improvisational perspective we can see the relevance of the physical act of putting words on the page. Metaphorical and literal rhythms and pauses—what Albert Murray, Fred Moten, and other commentators have called attention to as the "break," borrowing from jazz terminology—are honestly captured through such feverish typing.[102] Laughlin also recounts that Pound was impatient with his texts once they had been physically produced: "When he was in the heat of composing a canto," says Laughlin, "he didn't want to stop to do much checking. And reading proofs bored him. Consistency also bored him; he would often make different corrections in his English and American proofs."[103] If such apparently careless disregard for revision seems to contradict Pound's penchant for clarity and precision, it also reminds us of his pursuit of the image, the event, the rhythm of life as it happens. This emphasis on the *discipline* of improvisation, the practice of making a text as it happens, without revision, distills the thoughts and emotions of the Vortex in an spontaneous burst of energy.

Biographer Humphrey Carpenter even suggests, in a discussion of Pound's habit of weird humming as he typed, that Pound was said to have had "a passionate if eccentric sense of rhythm like that of a jazz drummer. It was closely related to the rhythmical subtlety of his experiments in quantitative verse, and the way in *Mauberley* in which the rhythm of individual words goes against the rhythmic structure of the stanzas—just as a jazz drummer uses a 4:4 time signature as the basis for elaborate improvisation."[104]

This sheds new light on Pound's famous dictum "As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."[105] And Carpenter's seemingly disparate metaphor—of Pound as a jazz drummer—is not as inaccurate as it may at first appear. For while Pound was never a jazz drummer, he was a "different drummer." Kenner recounts that, "When the *Villon* was performed at the Salle Pleyel, Pound played his own drums. He had watched Cocteau playing a drum in a jazz band, 'not with any African fervor but as if it were a very difficult mathematical operation.' "[106] From the quoted statement in Kenner's description (quoting Pound) it seems clear that Jean Cocteau's lack of "African fervor" was viewed as a defect by

Pound (Cocteau, a friend of Pound's, was humorously referenced in Pound's opera, *Le Testament*). On at least one occasion, in this case during a 1926 performance of Antheil's *Second Sonata for Violin with Accompaniment of Piano and Drums*, Pound found himself in the drum chair, where he presumably gave his version of "African fervor;" reported here by witness Vernon Loggins:

> Antheil, an excellent musician, was, I am sure, improvising, and the drummer—whiskers, grey tweeds—was obviously trying to communicate some sort of narrative with his drumming—maybe a battle, maybe the love act, maybe an encounter of wit. He employed many tempi and I could distinguish no definite rhythmic pattern. The performance was heard respectfully. I recall hoping that the evening might end in a riot. Not so. Pound's seriousness of mien in beating his big bass drum won the day.[107]

It is evident from the description that Pound either: a) didn't know how to correctly play the part, b)was intentionally playing with odd techniques at the direction of Antheil's score, or c)was improvising (whether he knew how to play correctly or not), as Loggins suggests Antheil was. However, it seems probable that Loggins was either a victim of an inaccurate performance of the piece, or simply ignorant as to what he was hearing; the drum part clearly has a "definite rhythmic pattern," albeit one not limited to "common," 4/4 time, and as Antheil himself declares of the piece:

> [It is] a composite composition somewhat relative to the Picasso 1918 cubist period in which Picasso assembled into one picture such banal commonplaces as café tables, mandolines, bits of actual newspaper, etc. The piano is treated percussively and is a many-teethed and pointed instrument against the, in this case, banal violin. The spirit of the music represents one phase of America – cubistic tin-pan alley. The thematic material is both original and from sentimental tunes long since become ridiculous. The whole goes into a final duet between bass drum and violin, in which the piano is abandoned, having gradually worked up to the percussive state where it finds its most complete expression in the drum rather than upon the keys.[108]

It is relevant here to note the percussive timbres of the piano that Antheil has created, especially in the context of Pound's antipathy for the piano, and in terms of later jazz performance practice by musicians such as Cecil Taylor, or, for that matter, early ragtime pianists. The "riotous" sounds of the piano, which have "worked up to the percussive state where it finds its most complete expression in the drum" could be considered an essentially Afro-centric version of keyboard playing. Jazz critic and photographer Valerie Wilmer would note three decades later that Cecil Taylor's piano technique was an attempt to play the keys "as if they were eighty-eight tuned drums."[109]

It is possible that these techniques were already an influence on Antheil's own playing and composing techniques, given that he had heard and seen jazz

performed live, and that early jazz pianists—especially in the "stride" style—were known to be extremely fast, dexterous, and powerful. While he did receive formal training on the instrument, Antheil was legendary for his unique playing style, which he developed through a practice routine described in his autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music*:

> I bought two huge fish bowls. I filled them with water and placed one on each side of my piano chair on low tables. Then I practiced for one full month, sixteen to twenty hours a day. Whenever one of my hands became swollen or bloody I merely placed it into one of the handy bowls of water. In this way I gained a technique which, when a month later I played for [concert promoter M. H. Hanson], took him off his feet.[110]

Despite the probable hyperbole in this description, accounts of Antheil's performances indicate that this aggressive style was a part of Antheil's piano playing. According to one concert review, Antheil reportedly played "the keys with his wrist and his palm as well as with his fingers" and "drew from the instrument strange barbaric sounds and created a sensation at his recital."[111] Unlocking the sheer physicality of the piano not only made for dramatic and memorable performances, which Antheil used to his advantage as he tried to become the toast of the avant-garde Paris salons, but also highlighted the "88-tuned drums" of the piano keys.

Antheil's use of the percussive quality of the piano—which is, after all, technically a percussion instrument—is one reason for Pound's belief that Antheil represented the missing link in his initially London-, and later Paris-based aesthetic circle: a Vorticist composer. While pianists (or, more accurately, keyboardists, starting as far back as Mozart) had often been known for such fiery performance technique, Antheil's early style and the idea of a more percussive piano takes on specific historical significance in an American context. The piano is a percussion instrument, which transformed American music, "ragged" it, and helped make the rhythms of jazz ubiquitous in countless home parlors and urban speakeasies.

Cecil Taylor says of the piano that "We in Black music think of the piano as a percussive instrument: we beat the instrument, we get inside the instrument."[112] In a 1926 paean to Antheil, Pound praises the composer's transformation of the piano back into a percussion instrument: "There is the use of the piano, no longer melodic, or cantabile, but solid, unified as one drum. I mean single sounds produced by multiple impact; as distinct from chords, which are sort of chains or slushes of sound."[113] This might as well be a description of Cecil Taylor's playing, with its spiky, aggressive "multiple impacts" that have created their own outcry years after Antheil's "riotous" music.

Perhaps not coincidentally, jazz critic Francis Davis has compared Taylor's complex performances (and Taylor's own poetry) to Pound's work, in an essay titled "The Cantos of Cecil Taylor"—both artists, says Davis, represent "the

reinvention of poetry as the movement of thought through the mind of an erudite man," and furthermore, "Taylor's *Cantos* are his performances . . . which make as many unreasonable demands as Pound's poetry, and are arguably no less worth the effort."[114]

Pound was struck primarily by the timbral qualities of the piano-as-drum, as well as the way in which these percussive timbres were pitches in and of themselves which comprised melodies, not harmonies that would wash out the momentum of rhythm. Rhythms move in and around each other—become polyrhythms—but they do not "harmonize" because they each represent a discrete line of sound and rhythm. Pound was not so much against harmony as he was against *lack of specificity*. Perhaps, given what many have described as his "tone-deafness" ("Ezra himself couldn't even carry a tune as far as I ever heard," quipped William Carlos Williams) Pound's interest in percussion and drumming was a natural compensation to a lack of understanding of real harmony.[115] But underlying this "interesting mistake" in Kenner's phrase, is Pound's misunderstanding of a *Western* idea in preference of an "Eastern," in this case, African idea.

Foregrounding drumming and rhythm at this moment in history was still considered by "high culture" as either avant-garde (as in the rhythmic propulsion of Stravinsky) or hopelessly popular and debased sexually (as in jazz and other "vernacular" musics). As I have recounted in the introduction, jazz on the one hand frequently represented an analogous, if not as "intricate" version of modern Western art music, and on the other hand, a sexualized expression of pure rhythm. But these criticisms were exactly what made artists like Antheil thrive on an (admittedly primitivized) ideal of African and African-American music; it was bodily, earthy, and avant-garde at once—that was the point.

The desire to embody rhythm drove Antheil to hurt himself at the piano during performance. It is significant that Antheil's technique was considered "barbaric" and "riotous," given that the very same music he was advocating as the most avant-garde—jazz and African music—was also being criticized for being barbaric, overtly sexual, and crude. Antheil, self-proclaimed "Bad Boy" provocateur of music, reveled in this barbarism, but this gleeful and glib anarchy must be tempered against the civilized, African and African-American artists who did not see what they did as barbaric, overtly sexual, or crude. Yet it is not surprising that the discourse surrounding the reception of (white) Antheil's music and that of (black) jazz was similar. Both musics were related to Africa, at a time when African-Americans were for the first time in American history undergoing a cultural and economic renaissance that threatened white power, culture, and philosophy.

Pound, like Antheil, saw the revolutionary potential in new rhythms, even while he shared a similar primitivistic glee for the origins of these rhythms. Antheil's piano-as-drum fascinated Pound because it shattered the lush harmonies of Post-Romantic music (particularly Impressionism) and foregrounded the strength and vigor of rhythm. Through rhythm an idea could be translated

or transmitted more directly. If each word was a tuned drum, then the rhythm of a poem could be felt clearly, vitally, and cut through the glamour of post-World War One dross and the flotsam of post-World War One wreckage.

Pound's interest in African drumming can also be connected to drumming *as* speech, which he discovered via his main anthropological source on Africa, Leo Frobenius (discussed below). His use of percussion in the snarling vocal passages set in tricky, ever-changing tempi in *Le Testament,* demonstrates a desire to present language via definite, identifiable musical rhythm, but a rhythm that itself is as mobile and flexible and wily as that of speech.[116] Schafer notes that "Pound's sense of rhythm has been called his greatest gift, and the service he did English verse by uprooting iambic pentameter and offering innumerable alternatives has perhaps had an indirect significance for contemporary music."[117] It is no wonder, then, that Pound as poet would try his hands at the drums.

Pound's enthusiasm for drums was consistent with a renewed interest in rhythm and percussion in Western music, inspired in no small amount by the development of a new instrument known initially as the "contraption set"—later shortened to the "traps." Like Ezra Pound's poetry, the drumset was and is a combination of East and West, allowing one person to perform complex music with timbres and instruments from the Middle East (cymbals), Africa (drums, certain bells and other percussive devices), Asia (cymbals, gongs, woodblocks, and tom-toms), and Europe (snare and bass drums) all at once. In a tongue-in-cheek comment from Pound's 1924 *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*, the poet manages to mock the piano and the "contraption-set" in the midst of statements praising Antheil's use of the piano as a percussion instrument: "The future of piano music lies in the Jazz, and we may soon expect a much louder and more varied contraption with xylophone, whistle, and gong attachment in the treble octaves and solid steel bars in the bass. This new and forthcoming implement should, from present indications, present most of the advantages over the pye-ano that the original forte-piano did to its predecessors."[118]

This comes after Pound has declared that American music, via Antheil, has become more solid, precise, "a world of steel bars."[119] Thus Pound here paradoxically acknowledges his futurist/primitivist admiration for percussion music-machines, which will, in the form of "The Jazz," transform music-making.

Similarly, Antheil credits Pound's skill as a composer, saying of *Le Testament*:

> "Time and not 'times' has changed . . . that is, our conception of it, no matter be the subject mediaeval or fifty thousand years hence . . . We want music, sheerly and physically music . . . With a simple gesture Pound gives us a real music."[120]

The "simple gesture" of Pound signifies both the metaphorical gesture of a music alive with rhythmic and melodic inventiveness, as well as the literal,

physical effects of the rhythm on a listener's ear and body. Just as Antheil's comment alludes to the developments in physics and philosophy that had transformed twentieth-century culture's perception of time, it also indicates the musical revolution in time that is both old and new at once: a physical, embodied music driven by a renewed focus on time and rhythm. The power of such music is summed up in Pound's assertion that "A sense of rhythm covers many defects," to which Antheil sardonically responded, "One might say almost all."[121]

In 1939, during his final return trip to America before he was captured in Italy during the war, Pound made time for a recording session. Here Pound once again played the "different drummer." Biographer Humphrey Carpenter tells the story:

> He agreed to make some gramophone records of his poetry for a series being compiled by the Department of Speech. He asked to play a set of kettle drums while recording "The Seafarer." This was arranged, and the general opinion was that his performance would have been "magnificent with a rehearsal." As it was, he merely gave "a few reverberating strokes" then waved his sticks in the air, with only an occasional thump on the drums, being too engrossed in the words . . . He also read for the recording Canto 17 (the earthly paradise), and what he called the "Bloody Sestina" ("Altaforte"). The drums were used again for this, and Donald Hall, who heard the recording many years later, describes how it made him jump in his chair—it begins with a shout, and during it there is a thumping which "sounded as if he were kicking a filing cabinet."[122]

Pound was literally—and perhaps poorly in terms of technique, but effectively nevertheless—improvising on the drums, trying to make the words and the sound adhere in the listener's ear. The recording of *Altaforte* does tend to scare the listener; the out-of-tune tympani, matched by the warbly recording, sound strange.[123] The drum accents are scattered, aiding the dramatic effect of the words but giving little evidence of formal technique on the part of Pound. Pound's drumming might have been rudimentary, but his dedication to rhythm and drumming as an idea remained serious. In the *Altaforte* recording, Pound was playing timpani, not a drumset as in Carpenter's vision of him as a jazz drummer. But in this performance and others—including his rhythmic typing as he furiously tried to complete the *Cantos*—Pound brought his interest in rhythm into percussive life.

In the final section of this chapter, I will focus more specifically on the relationship between Antheil and Pound, and discuss their contributions to Nancy Cunard's 1934 anthology *Negro*. Again, rhythms are the key to the Pound sound, and indicate how the improvisations of African and African-American culture found their way into the work of a poet not often associated with the Jazz Age. As Pound would emphasize as early as 1924, "the African's drumming contains the root of the matter."[124]

Antheil, Pound, and the African (American) Paideuma

I. Ez and All That Jazz

Through a combination of racism, ignorance of actual music theory, and the influence of Antheil's own prejudices (not against jazz, but against boring jazz, as I will recount below), jazz itself is rarely mentioned by Pound in his poetry. In the *Cantos* the word "jazz" is only used three times, all essentially in the pejorative or at least comical sense (see 7.26, 55.291–2). A similarly pejorative use of the term "djassban" for *jazzband*—possibly a version of Poundian black dialect, but more likely one of many alternative spellings of "jazz" in the early twentieth century—occurs in Canto 29.143.[125]

The lack of critical attention regarding Pound's activities as an actual musician and to the influence of Antheil's ideas on his musical thinking have made it difficult to reconcile the dearth of poetic references to jazz with the more complex story revealed elsewhere in his life and work. Antheil himself used jazz elements, both "theoretically"—that is, in terms of what he thought jazz was doing—and musically—that is, in terms of actual musical material from melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and instrumentation—in his own music, and he was by no means alone in this interest and active experimentation with jazz within his cohort of contemporary art music composers. But it is crucial to understanding *Pound's* musical tastes to also understand that Antheil's music sounded the way it did partly because he felt so strongly about, and was influenced by, black music.

Not coincidentally, Pound's interest in German anthropologist and Africanist Leo Frobenius (whom he met in 1930 but had read as early as 1929) was also partially inspired by musical concerns.[126] Frobenius was nearly the same age as Pound (only six years older than the poet), and remarkably similar in appearance.[127] "From the early 1900s," recounts Carpenter, Frobenius "conducted expeditions in Africa. Inspired by the newly discovered Paleolithic cave-paintings in Europe, he wished to examine the theory that European culture originated in Africa and swept northwards in what he called a continuous *Kulturmorphologie*."[128]

The most well-known of Frobenius's ideas appropriated by Pound was his concept of *paideuma*, a term that also became the name of the journal devoted to Pound scholarship. For Frobenius, *paideuma* "'is roughly the same thing as Spengler's 'culture-soul' "—the essential components that make up a given culture.[129] Furthermore, *paideuma* in Frobenius's terms existed on multiple levels: "the first level . . . embraced a generalized world culture; the second . . . the culture of single populations (nation-states, linguistic spheres, breeding populations, etc.); and the third . . . the course of spiritual development of the individual person as viewed within the contexts of the preceding [levels]."[130] According to Frobenius's schema, "no culture 'dies' " and "all cultures [are] functionally equal, and absolutely unrelated to race."[131] Pound borrowed from

Frobenius's original concept and, as was characteristic of all of his "translations," made it new in Poundian language. His definition of *paideuma* in *Guide to Kulchur* is "the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period" and "the gristly roots of ideas that are in action."[132]

Aldon Nielsen has detailed the subsequently "tangled and gristly," racist and racialized structure (created by Pound, not by Frobenius), of Pound's use of African languages and symbols in the *Cantos* via Frobenius.[133] It seems clear that Pound's interest in African culture was based in a primitivism that could not grant full humanity to Africans, or African-Americans. What he granted in admiration for the Africa he experienced indirectly through Frobenius, he contradicted with a lingering racism and faith in the more advanced status of Anglos, even though they too might be "half-savage" (as he famously called America in *Hugh-Selwyn Mauberley*). As Michael North has suggested of Pound and Eliot's use of black dialect, "The proximity of black speech to their own seems to Pound and Eliot both an opportunity to be seized and an affliction to be regretted."[134] Nevertheless, I am interested in the ways in which Pound sometimes seized on these "opportunities" and the often surprising places they took him in his work. As we will see, the combined influences of Antheil and Frobenius added an additional level of complexity to the contradictory, "different drummer" Pound in terms of his attitudes towards Africa. The proximity of black *music* offered a simultaneous "opportunity" and "affliction" for Pound's "new paideuma."

II. Pound, Antheil, and the Negro Anthology

A little-known facet of Pound's involvement in the African *paideuma* is his contribution to one of the most important twentieth-century publications dealing with Africa and the African diaspora, Nancy Cunard's 1934 *Negro: An Anthology.*[135]

This collection of essays, poems, song texts, musical transcriptions, photographs, and statistics, is perhaps only matched in size and scale by the publication of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Africana* encyclopedia, almost 60 years later; yet unlike the latter work, *Negro* incorporates not only short scholarly articles and photographs but the full range of cultural and artistic production that can be represented in book form: poetry, musical transcriptions, etc. A remarkable feat, particularly considering that during the time of *Negro*'s publication, African Americans were being lynched in the United States, and Africans were facing the daily struggles of colonization. On the pages of Cunard's *Negro*, then, Pound found himself (figuratively, at least), closer to jazz and other forms of black culture in print than ever before.

The anthology is important for many reasons, two of which are particularly relevant for this discussion: (1) it demonstrates a clear connection between Pound, Antheil, and African/African-American music, and (2) it also offers

a unique perspective on the discourse of jazz during the 1930s and how a particular group of modernist writers interacted with that discourse; most notably, Pound, Samuel Beckett, and Langston Hughes. Hughes's contributions also dovetail with Pound, as it is one of Hughes's letters to Pound, regarding the issue of black education in the US, that appears under the heading "A Letter to Ezra Pound," with marginal comments by Pound. During this period, Pound and Hughes were also in correspondence (I will discuss their correspondence further in the next chapter) regarding the infamous Scottsboro case, and Pound allowed Hughes to include one of *his* letters regarding the case in an auction to raise money for the "Boys." Pound's letter states of the case that "There is no doubt in my mind that the extreme Southern states are governed by the worst there is in them."[136]

Negro was published at the apex of leftist and communist connections between whites and blacks in America and abroad. It is thus significant that Pound was among those supportive of the unpopular and communist-backed defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a case that became archetypal of inter-war American racism. Admittedly, Pound was essentially a permanent ex-pat by this point, but he still identified himself with America and was involved with many American correspondents from a diverse range of occupations and political persuasions (later including politicians like Senators William Borah of Idaho and Bronson Cutting of New Mexico).[137] Even when he was arrested for treason, he maintained that he had never said or done anything "anti-American," stating in 1949 of his Rome radio broadcasts that they were done "only on [the] condition that he should never be asked to say anything contrary to his conscience or contrary to his duties as an American citizen."[138]

In the 1930s, Pound believed that the American left, particularly the communist party, included the most worthy interlocutors for his economic and social ideas (even though he disagreed with their basic philosophical tenets), because they at least acknowledged that the current American economic system was corrupt and ineffective.[139] As Pound would himself say of the left, in a piece published in *Morada*, a short-lived left-wing literary magazine based out of New Mexico, "they are much more likely to think than any other crowd in America."[140] Additionally, while the relationship between the communist party and African-American society is complex and often troubled (as depicted scathingly by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*), during the 1930s, communists were some of the only members of (non-black) American society who were openly critical of the structural racism of American culture. It is thus no wonder that many African Americans were sympathetic to, or members of the communist party.

Well known figures like Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes noted that, at least from the admittedly limited perspective of an outsider (ignorant of Stalin's pogroms and other crimes of the state) the Soviet Union seemed much more harmonious in terms of racial equality than the supposedly "all men created equal" land of the U.S.A. Langston Hughes, Like Robeson, also traveled

to the U.S.S.R. and toured its diverse Central Asian territories in the early 1930s.[141] To find Pound as a minor player in this drama is significant, even more so because his connections to music become clearer in terms of the leftist and communist-oriented *Negro*'s overarching domain.

Pound contributed one piece to *Negro*, along with the letters mentioned above. While his interest in influencing the American left may have been partially responsible for his submissions, he was also professionally involved with the anthology's publisher and editor, Nancy Cunard. Cunard's Paris-based Hours Press published an early edition of *The Cantos*, and Pound and Cunard belonged to a similar milieu of ex-pats adrift in the transatlantic world—perhaps no coincidence for Cunard, whose family owned the ships that brought so many tourists and travelers back and forth between the new and old world.[142]

Cunard was a significant figure not only in Modernist literary circles by virtue of her press (which also published Beckett's first poetry), but also in interwar race relations. Her lover, Henry Crowder, was an African-American jazz pianist, and her *Negro* anthology was a labor of love: an enormous, and enormously important milestone in the study and advocacy of black cultures. Ezra Pound was known to publish in all sorts of places, obscure and well-known, but Cunard's anthology did not contain any other well-known Anglo-American modernists with the exception of a speech by Theodore Dreiser, and submissions by two of Pound's friends and correspondents, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. Samuel Beckett was not yet widely known, and his contributions are limited to translations of several French-language pieces by other authors; yet these translations already bear the mark of a great writer. Thus it is significant that Pound would be one of the few white modernists included in the volume.

Pound's contribution to *Negro*, working in tandem with the correspondence with Hughes, is a brief excerpt from the work of Leo Frobenius, with commentary by Pound, entitled "Leo Frobenius." It is included in the "Africa" section of the anthology, and surrounded by pieces on culture and politics detailing the historical and current African scene. It contains a typically Poundian excoriation of American provinciality (both black and white) in the face of the rich culture of the "dark continent":

> It is enough that . . . Frobenius should have been to Africa before there was a chair of Africanology at Hawvud to delay the reception of either for twenty or forty years. I should also have more respect for the Afro-American intelligentzia and for the Negro millionaires, etc., that are rumored to flourish in Harlem if they had shown more alacrity in hearing of an author who has shown their race its true charter of nobility and who has dug out of Africa tradition overlaid on tradition to set against the traditions of Europe and Asia.[143]

If we have read the previous contents of the anthology, we have already seen Hughes give his opinion on these matters in his correspondence with

Pound: "Of course, there ought to be a chair of Africanology in a Negro university. But one can't ought it into being without a sensible place for it in, and somebody who knows something about the subject and loves it, to head it . . . Did I ever suggest that you write to Alain Locke about the matter? He's a professor at Howard . . . "[144]

Hughes here slyly goads Pound for not having heard of nor contacted perhaps the most influential African-American scholar of the early twentieth century besides W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke. Locke was also a contributor to *Negro*, emphasizing that, despite his potentially good intentions, Pound was out of the loop in his knowledge of black scholars. Moreover, Michael North points out that "Claude McKay has mentioned Frobenius in print as early as 1922, and Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire were about to discover Frobenius for themselves, without any help from Pound."[145]

Yet Pound's admiration of Frobenius's earlier work is significant, particularly because in the case of the *Negro* excerpt, it connects African cultures to Pound's own search for an intuitive relationship between music and language. The remainder of the excerpt is a translation of a passage from Frobenius detailing the way in which music is used as communication in Africa. In the passage, Frobenius describes how a tribesman-informant from his expeditions to the "African primaeval forest" relays a message via drums:

> He went to the local chiefling and took him to the riverbank where there was peeled tree-trunk, with one long slit down the middle, laid across a couple of blocks. This is the signal drum. The beater began Tataratata-tatatatatatatatata-taaa-ratatatara! The sounding-board of the great spread forest on the other bank took it up and carried it on. An answer sounded out the distance. All received, all done in the time of lightning . . .[146]

Pound includes a final excerpt regarding the "wild Tribes in North Togo," of which Frobenius states:

> They don't drum, they blow on little flutes. On these flutes they send the last news from village to village. I researched and found that these people can mention everything by its name, they can indicate every time and hour, every object, every plant, and every animal and they can indicate it as exactly with their flutes as with language.[147]

Closing the piece, Pound comments that "Frobenius is full of such paragraphs. This last he calls the most notable act of Frau Musika in Africa, and then thinks better of it and describes a drum concert."[148]

What is fascinating about the passage is that it deals specifically with a concept common to various African cultures: drumming languages, the fusion of rhythmic sounds from drums with actual semantic content. To Pound, this was surely evidence that the "primitive" Africans had not lost the secret link between music and speech, and hence the corollary art of musical poetry. It is

also another link between Pound and drumming, and it is no wonder that the amateur drummer Pound would cite Frobenius's *own* wonder at the drumming language. Here we can begin to more fully understand the multiple levels of Pound's interest in black cultures via the specific context of Pound's actual experience as a composer and drummer.

This of course does not make Pound "less" of a primitivist or racist, but it does situate his interests in rhythm more squarely in the realm of practical application than in primitivist theorizing—potentially making him "more" racist, and connects him to figures like the (all-white) Original Dixieland Jazz Band's leader, Nick LaRocca, who infamously appropriated the sound and style of African-American culture at that culture's expense.[149] Had Pound ever actually *heard* anything remotely resembling African drumming, and if he had, would he still have been so enamored of its melopoetic potential? On the latter count it seems possible, but it is unlikely (and never mentioned by Pound, despite his frequent references to African drumming) that he heard live or recorded music from Africa. As Michael North asserts, even Pound's seemingly enthusiastic use of black dialect had more to do with keeping the contemporary, actual speech and culture of Africans and African Americans in a securely separate past, which Pound could use for his own racist and primitivistic purpose: "The "tradition" evoked by these black voices," says North, "is the polar opposite of the modern world of jazz with its improvisation and mobility: it is rural, repressive, stratified, and static."[150]

However, the fact that his own compositions, and the rhythmic intensity of Antheil's work, often rely on rhythms and timbres that would not be necessarily commonplace in Western art music suggests that Pound was more astute than many critics regarding the musical potential of African drum "choirs." Kept at a distance in time and space, Pound's primitivized conceptions of the world, including America, were curiously patronizing and revolutionary at once by virtue of the fact that he was even lending credence to non-European ideas. Again, Pound as an advocate for African drumming—especially in the context of *Negro*—works against his essentializing and race-based rhythmic fascination, just as his attempts at closure and completion in the *Cantos* works against the more open-ended, improvisational aesthetic giving form to the poem.[151]

Like Adorno, Pound probably had never heard jazz being improvised in the way that would take it out of the realm of popular, entertaining melodies for dancing, as the negative references to jazz in the *Cantos* suggest.[152] Yet the allure of African drumming for Pound is not primarily the sexualized, sweaty, sensuous savage in the jungle—so often the case in essentializing images of African and African-American peoples during the twentieth century—but rather the notion of a cerebral, almost mystical union of speech, thought, and sound that could carry language via patterns and timbres not dependent on words. It is feeling, but it is not a bodily, sexualized feeling; it is a telepathic linkage of mind and sound which Pound clearly wished to create in his poetry,

as a shaman of his particular "tribe," and that led him to experiment with his own drumming.

Not surprisingly, then, Antheil's *Negro* piece, "The Negro on the Spiral *or* A Method of Negro Music," like Pound's contribution, highlights black music in primitivistic albeit admiring rhetoric. The following excerpt provides an characteristic sample:

> Neither can I in so short a space adequately give any idea of Negro music whatsoever; but I can sketch a method. This method would be to start upon the spiral at the Congo, and go clockwise to South America, the West Indies, North America, and then cut the spiral downwards sharply to Europe . . . A greater duty would be to trace, scientifically and carefully, the development of the Great Spiral, the victory of the Slav over the German, and the victory of the Negro over the Slav.[153]

By reading this piece in tandem with Pound's we can clearly see the mutual fascination with African rhythmic concepts. By 1934 Antheil had become (in) famous as a composer, and was only a few years away from his eventual settling down in the film music world of Hollywood. But his comments on African and other non-Western musics in the *Negro* essay can also be contextualized in terms of Antheil's first trip to North Africa, during the time of his greatest contact with Pound. In fact, it is ironically Pound that "drove" Antheil to Africa. As Antheil describes in his autobiography, Pound had commissioned a violin sonata for Olga Rudge:

> Ezra soon stopped in again, was pleased to see that the sonata had grown so perceptibly. Its first movement was now complete. He warned however, that *two* sonatas were needed and that the concert was a bare four months away. When he left us I suddenly went quite to pieces. Two violin sonatas! So, very logically, I said to [Antheil's wife] Boski: "Boski, we are going to Africa!"[154]

What started as an excuse to get away from Paris, however, became an opportunity for Antheil to learn more about the continent that inspired some of his most (in)famous compositions. While he did not hear the "aesthetic of the Congo" which he lauds in his *Negro* essay—he was touring North Africa, not sub-Saharan Africa—he did come away from his actual contact with non-Western music with a healthy respect and awe. The trip made him

> philosophize upon how little, really, Western music knows about Eastern music, and how vast that Eastern music is. One day in Tunis proper I saw a vast modern gramophone shop, with streamlined listening booths and row upon row of gramophone-disk sets . . . Here, actually, were tens of thousands of disks played, sung, and recorded by thousands of "well-known" or "famous" Arabian artists, but artists I had never heard of . . . Yet here it all was, and in a fine gramophone shop too, comparable to anything on Hollywood Boulevard. And with dozens of

> great gramophone-disk factories, from Morocco to the Philippines, behind that gramophone shop and thousands more like it throughout the Orient![155]

This is a striking acknowledgment by a Western composer of the wealth of "world music" at a time when that music was—as, ironically, Antheil himself engages in—lumped into a single category of "Oriental." Pound himself had actually once traveled to Tangier, where he heard what was probably Arab art music (Pound calls it "'the king's dinner music' and other traditional tunes")—one of the rare cases where his knowledge of non-Western music was backed up by actual observation and listening. Pound's son, Omar, went on to become a scholar of the Middle East and even held the position of headmaster during the early 1960s at the American School of Tangier.[156]

It is important to note here that despite Antheil's focus on North Africa, and by extension points East ("Morocco to the Philippines"), sub-Saharan African music is also necessarily a part of his global record shop. This becomes apparent when reading his piece in *Negro*, which clearly identifies the remarkable aesthetic resources of African music. In fact, it is the primitive but modern "Negro music" that "saves" all Western music from the pain and enervation of World War One:

> Negro music appeared suddenly (after a gigantic preparation) after the greatest war of all time . . . it came upon a bankrupt spirituality . . . Negro music made us to remember at least that we still had bodies which had not been exploded by shrapnel and that the cool, 4 o'clock morning sunshine still coming over the hot veldt of yesterday was this morning very, very sweet."[157]

As Daniel Albright has suggested, "Ultimately Antheil sees modernism as a movement that will Africanize the whole continent of Europe."[158] For a moment, at least, Pound and Antheil themselves had been "Africanized" in the pages of *Negro*: the difficult, different drummer and the Bad Boy of music. While Pound's minstrelsy was by now a standard part of his repertoire of voices and personae, when contextualized within the earlier musical experiments and Pound's continuing interest in drumming, the contributions to *Negro* by Pound and Antheil nevertheless provide a richer picture of the complicated modernist relationships forged under the sign of race.

Chapter 2

Langston Hughes: "How to Take the Impossible and Make it Dance"

Langston Hughes is perhaps the most logical choice for inclusion in an analysis of modernist poets whose work intersects with improvisational practice. Hughes is widely acknowledged as one of the first and most influential "jazz" poets—Amiri Baraka calls him "*the* Jazz Poet"—and one of the first American writers (black or white) to respectfully and seriously consider the blues as a laudable and important part of American culture. Yet as Amiri Baraka also stated in a 1986 introduction to Hughes's first autobiography, *The Big Sea*: "Langston Hughes is, in one sense, the most underrated writer in this country. His name is conjured recently, with encouraging frequency, yet there are a startling majority of American artists who know even less than cocktail party jabber about the Black masses' main poetic man."[1]

Baraka's words encapsulate the ambivalent relationship Hughes and his work have had over the years with critics, readers, and—as when he went before the McCarthy hearings—politicians. If Baraka's assessment seems surprising now some two decades later, we must acknowledge the work of critics and editors (most notably, Hughes's most well-known biographer, Arnold Rampersad) who have secured Hughes's reputation as a writer. But two areas in particular which require further scholarship include: Hughes's multiplicitous or "multicultural" outlook and the ways in which this is inseparable from his equally passionate American proto-*Négritude*; and the full realization of his musical concepts in terms of his collaborations with musicians.[2]

Additionally, while Hughes's reputation and influence cannot be denied, too often it seems that outside of Hughes scholarship the full scope of his career is underestimated and unknown. The standard view of Hughes seems to be that he was an important poet of the Harlem Renaissance; again an undeniable fact, but also an incomplete picture of the ways in which his work spanned the early to mid-twentieth century, and how he worked in so many different settings. Harold Bloom's quip that Arnold Rampersad's biography of the poet is more interesting than Hughes's work itself is indicative of this attitude.[3]

One reason for the continuing lack of attention paid to complexities of figures like Hughes is, I believe, a long-standing discomfort with the improvisational aspects of modernism. This is a typical gap particularly in scholarship about musico-literary connections, and sometimes I believe it reflects not so much unwitting racist or classist attitudes toward non-"classical" styles but a rather an ignorance of the actual performance practices and histories of those styles (which we could attribute to a structural racism within English literary scholarship at large).[4]

Thus the Harlem Renaissance becomes an important period, but only for *black* poets, and jazz becomes important, but only as a source for enlivening

Western art classical music. The actual histories are more complex. As Baraka asserts, "[Hughes] talks enough about the white literary world so that we are at least reminded that what is called "Anglo-American modernism" and the Harlem Renaissance are, in fact, contemporaneous."[5] Hughes himself questions the legacy of the "so-called Negro Renaissance" in *The Big Sea*: "The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."[6]

In many ways the Harlem Renaissance years of the 1920s were a turbulent and painful time for Hughes as he struggled to become a writer and to break free of his fractured family life. The 1930s is the decade wherein Hughes finally started to see the financial rewards of his writing, and this decade was also the time in which the musical and social models of blues and jazz were galvanized by the socialist political life he began to lead. If the 1920s, 30s and 40s left him somewhat enervated and tired, it was this same weariness that maintained his poetic drive even, and perhaps especially, in the darkest times. Like the blues singers he wrote about and imagined as his speakers, Hughes was a transient, down-on-his luck wanderer for much of the first 30 or 40 years of his life.

In this chapter I will add to the current and welcome scholarship on Hughes, but in ways that will attempt to complicate the standard views of Harlem's "Negro Laureate." Like the jazz music that influenced his work, Hughes's writing has often been very popular while at the same time hotly contested in terms of its political and aesthetic value. His widely anthologized 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," responds to criticism he was already receiving at age 24 after having published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*. Under fire from the black intelligentsia attempting to distance themselves from any potentially negative (especially in the eyes of whites) behavior, black artists like Hughes who validated "low-class" African-American cultural practices like jazz and blues faced criticism from all sides. Hughes responded with a brief manifesto that should be placed beside similar manifestos of other modernist avant-garde movements, since it was effectively a defense of the new jazz avant-garde which itself fueled many of the other avant-gardes:

> Let the blare of Negro Jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand . . . If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[7]

This stridency hides, or, perhaps, ironically demonstrates that Hughes was nevertheless deeply interested and influenced by public and critical opinion, but its basic message of individualism is something that remained consistent throughout Hughes's career, and is one reason why his aesthetic and political status is still debated. As I will discuss later, the underlying figure of rhythm,

in the image of the tom-tom, and the strategic essentialism which Hughes places on black culture as a means of bringing disparate cultures together, are the features which often frustrate critics attempting to make sense of Hughes as, on the one hand, a positive voice for black pride and on the other, a writer *exclusively* black and therefore unimportant for the wider modernist canon.

Hughes, as actor and friend Ossie Davis described in a documentary on the poet, used "music, jazz, improvisation" and showed us "how to take the impossible and make it dance."[8] The central impossibilities for Hughes are the essentialisms of race and racism, as well as the complexities of successfully improvising a life within this racist setting. In this chapter I develop a theoretical and historical approach to viewing Hughes's aesthetic and poetic project via improvisation. Along with material from his two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander,* I focus on the most well-known of Hughes's book-length poems directly influenced by jazz, *Montage of A Dream Deferred* (the other being *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*), and I discuss the musical collaborations between Hughes and Charles Mingus, Randy Weston, and other musicians.

Hughes and Jazz Consciousness

I. Modernism's Blackness, America's Blackness

In a 1941 speech given in a Los Angeles church, Duke Ellington riffed on Langston Hughes's poem (which itself riffed on Whitman) *I, Too Sing America*: "We play more than a minority role, in singing 'America' . . . we became more than a part of America! We—this kicking, yelling, touchy, sensitive, scrupulously-demanding minority—are the personification of the ideal begun by the Pilgrims almost 350 years ago."[9] Hughes himself often wrote about the black origins of the Americas, and in a 1955 "sound-documentary" (Hughes calls it a "pageant") for the Folkways label, *The Glory of Negro History,* he spoke about these origins to the accompaniment of dramatic sound effects:

> It *is* glorious—this history of ours! It is a *great* story—that of the Negro in America! It begins *way* before America was American, or the U.S.A. the U.S.A. It covers a wide span, our story. Let me tell it to you. *(Sound effect: boom of sea waves) (Sound effect: whistle of wind)*
>
> Hear the wind in the sails of the ships of Columbus? They say one of his pilots, Pedro Alonso Nino, was a Negro. That was in 1492. Certainly by the early 1500's, *black* explorers were coming to the New World. One of them was Estavan—or Estavanico, his nickname—which means in Spanish "Kid Steve."
>
> . . . . Perhaps because he was colored, Estavan got along well with the Indians. He learned their various languages, and soon became a famous guide . . . and he discovered the rich and beautiful country of gold, copper, and cotton, and

> flowers that is now Arizona. So you see, the first Negroes did not come to America as slaves. They came as explorers.[10]

Ellington and Hughes thus prefigure the notion that Amiri Baraka dubs the "Post American"; what Aldon Nielsen describes as a "vision of what is truly American" . . . rooted in a prior blackness that reveals a post-America."[11] The past from this point of view, as Nielsen states, "is what we pass beyond, where we meet ourselves coming and going, [a] nexus of cross-purposes."[12] Thus the poetics of the Americas necessarily charts the movement, the navigation, of these multiple layers of time and space. Post-Americanism, then, like postmodernism, can at its best allow us to pragmatically and playfully reconsider history and reclaim individual and community agency for the present and future.

Perhaps this sort of utopian time travel and social transformation is what caused John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign to publish Hughes's *Let America be America Again* and other poems as a tool to promote Kerry's purported message of change (a move which also foreshadowed Barack Obama's eventual candidacy). Kerry's preface to the volume states: "While [*Let America be America Again*] is a litany of the great promise of opportunity that has drawn so many of the world's disaffected to our shores, the poem is also a call to make that promise real for all Americans."[13] The post-American sentiment of the poem acts as a rallying cry for political change, calling on the implied justice of the American republic to be actualized in ways that it never has been before. In this way, the sentiments of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are post-American: ideals that have existed in part but never been fully recognized. The *past* (or *passed*?) promise of American idealism leads to struggles in the present for *future* justice.

Just as Ezra Pound used the metaphorical and the actual practice of music as a model for the way in which he thought about history and time, jazz music offered Hughes an aesthetic of travel and movement through its basis in improvisation. Improvisation is a movement of ideas, a flow of tradition through innovation. Jazz can be static, but at its best it is a dynamic harnessing of discipline in the service of freedom. Langston Hughes's poetry is a poetry of the perambulatory jazz aesthetic, and his frequent and wide-ranging travels around the world are a reflection of this aesthetic. Despite the widely known details of his travels—often described by Hughes himself in his own autobiographical writings—Hughes is frequently cast in the role of the localized Harlemite, writing a poetry about and for African Americans. This is partly who Hughes was—but what is missing from this depiction is the way in which this localized Harlemite, writing poetry about and for black people, is the embodiment of movement and a global reach *by virtue of his blackness*.

More than a verification of the "eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul" as he would put it in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes's deployment of jazz and blues poetics exemplifies the *already* multiplicitous

nature of "Negro art" and the rapidly expanding global reach of Afrodiasporic music.[14] By deploying jazz and blues as a central trope in his work—and indeed, by becoming a collaborator and performer with important jazz musicians—Hughes made a poetics that could be black as well as boundless, or rather, a poetics that showed that blackness *was* boundless.

If blackness was a group designation forced on a diversity of African peoples brought to the new world, that blackness was reconstituted and improvised in the Americas as a sign of the strength of collaboration and a framework for resistance. The world was already *in* jazz and black culture in general by virtue of the fact that black culture was already composed of so much of the world. As Josh Kun has said of Hughes's Whitmanic riffing, "the America Hughes sang of was never bound by fixed national borders."[15] And it is this multiplicity of places and voices that links Hughes's jazz poetics with his socialist and humanist sensibilities. Out of the specificity of racial oppression, the consolidation of black culture against the sign of whiteness, a nuanced, witty, and improvisational collection of voices, aesthetics, and imaginative solutions to real world problems formed the basis for Hughes's work. As Eric Prieto has described of French writer and anthropologist Michel Lereis's interest in jazz, Hughes, too, used jazz "as a kind of analytic lever . . . in an effort to discover universal principles of truth and excellence available across cultures and disciplines."[16]

Hughes's travels then, are not a "worldly" balance to his localized, Harlem aesthetic. Hughes's perambulatory life is a reflection of his perambulatory aesthetic, an aesthetic that was found in the *already worldly* and fluid structures of jazz and blues. Unlike Ezra Pound, who traveled constantly back into the past even as he strove to "make it new," and who wandered primarily in Europe, Hughes actually traveled throughout Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Hughes—and this is significant given his mastery of African-American poetic forms—had certainly even seen more of the United States and understood its essential problems than had Pound, a fact which Pound ironically admitted in a 1932 letter to Hughes's friend Countee Cullen: "I have been out of America country [sic] so long that I have no idea whatever of conditions."[17] Meanwhile, Hughes was on his way to the Soviet Union after having completed an extensive U.S. lecture circuit.[18]

This is not to say that artists must physically travel to a place in order to validate the imaginary landscapes or philosophical positions of their art (the intensely imaginative Wallace Stevens, for one, traveled little compared to Hughes); rather, Hughes's travels are a natural extension of the peripatetic, improvisational aesthetic at the heart of his work. Paul Gilroy and others have detailed how a fundamental understanding of and creation of modernity began in the ships which brought slaves to the new world.[19] Langston Hughes used the ships of *his* era to bring him to new and old shores, which in turn helped him see the diversity of experience in his own culture.

Hughes was not "re-connecting" with his black roots by making jazz and blues poems. He was redefining those roots in relation to the already stultifying

histories they had grown into: twentieth-century, post-Reconstruction America. "I was only an American negro," says Hughes in *The Big Sea*, "who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa."[20]

But Hughes, nor any other African or African American could never "be" Africa, precisely because the vision of Africa that was dominant in most modernist discourse was a white-constructed version of primitive space, not a collection of diverse and deeply complex people, places, and cultures. Ironically, it was on the Coast of West Africa, during his first trip to that continent, where Hughes learned an important lesson about the complicated hues of color that had hardened into "race" during the centuries of slavery and after:

> . . . farther down the coast it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright, the rivers deep. The great Africa of my dreams! But there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro . . . You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word "Negro" is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown."[21]

Yet between these twin poles of black essentialism—Black America on the one side and Black Africa on the other—Hughes piloted a course that is exemplary of the Black Atlantic. In Gilroy's formulation, "the unashamedly hybrid character of these black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal."[22]

Josh Kun's illuminating reading of the Latin American and pan-Caribbean aspects in Hughes's work points to further complexity of the hybrid, fluid aesthetic in Hughes's work, and asserts that Hughes's work is more accurately viewed in an "inter-American frame."[23] Furthermore, the forms and functions of African-American *musical* expression with which Hughes was so intimately involved, according to Gilroy, "[derive their special power] from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity."[24] It is precisely this "unsteadiness" that makes Hughes's work so important while at the same time making it hard to categorize, and, for some commentators, easier to ignore.

Ethnomusicologist and jazz musician Paul Austerlitz has used Gilroy's concepts to articulate a theory of "jazz consciousness": "Jazz consciousness embodies an aesthetic of inclusion and an ethos of ecumenicity . . . [it] however, is no shallow call for 'color-blindness'" and the artists reflecting a jazz consciousness "are not naive about race . . . it is precisely because of their acute awareness of the vicissitudes of life that they articulate a version

of pan-humanity."[25] A sense of this "pan-humanity" is found in Hughes's socialist poetry of the 1930s and 40s, as in the visual-aural collages of *Broadcast on Ethiopia*, *Wait*, and *Chant for May Day*—which specifically states in its performance notes that it is "To be read by a Workman with, for background, the rhythmic waves of rising and re-rising Mass Voices, multiplying like the roar of the sea" (209).[26] A pan-humanism, or what Gilroy calls a "strategic universalism" also undergirds Hughes's concept of music and life itself.[27] The speaker of his early poem *Lenox Avenue: Midnight* proclaims: "The rhythm of life / Is a jazz rhythm, / Honey. / The gods are laughing at us" (92).

In another of his dramatic Folkways educational recordings, *The Rhythms of the World, Created and Narrated by Langston Hughes, using documentary recordings*, we hear:

> The chirp of a cricket
> sound effect of cricket, then footsteps)
> and you walking into a room are all related. You, and sunrise, and birds, and games and thunder and songs and crickets and baby lambs are all related.
> Listen! Let me tell you how.
> . . . . Your rhythms on this earth first began with the beat of your heart. Thousands of years ago, man probably transferred the rhythm of the heartbeat into a drumbeat . . . [28]

Underlying the levity of some of Hughes's narration is a serious point consistent with much of his work: the rhythms of life underlie the rhythms of music, and those life-rhythms—real and metaphorical—bind all humanity together in a kind of music.

Legendary free-jazz drummer Milford Graves, whom Paul Austerlitz studied with and who was crucial in his theorization of "jazz consciousness," speaks of the roots of rhythm in similarly universal terms: "I say that the origin of the drum is in the human body, in the human heart. Belief and faith are powerful, but there is also a biological basis for the power of music."[29]

Of all of the poets in the present study, Hughes probably had heard the greatest variety of actual "world" music, from Balinese gamelan and West African drumming (also included on the above recording) to every kind of Afrodiasporic music, including some of the avant-garde jazz of his later years. For Hughes, music was one of the most vital forms of human expression, and his charting of the many forms of African and African-American music on the Folkways recordings and accompanying books was another manifestation of this passion for music as expressed in his "serious" writing. While ethnomusicologists have rightly critiqued the naive truism that "music is a universal language," music is also a powerfully connective and potentially unifying force. As Austerlitz states, "One of the hallmarks of musical consciousness is that it can unite things that are separated in nonmusical reality."[30]

Thus the unity (or at least ubiquity) of rhythm, and the pulse of modernity is an analogue for both jazz consciousness and consciousness in general.

Modernity unleashed a set of energies which were not new to the world but which became felt and defined in new ways, of which the spread of jazz culture and consciousness was a crucial part. Ann Douglas, in her volume charting some of these myriad modern energy flows, details how philosopher William James was central in defining how modern consciousness relates to the pulse of life. Compare the previous excursus on rhythm from Hughes with the following passage from James: "In [New York] city on February 14, 1907," says Douglas, James declares that he

> caught the pulse of the machine [of New York], took up the rhythm, and vibrated mit [with it] and found it simply magnificent. The courage, the heaven-scaling audacity of it all, and the *lightness* withall, as if there was nothing that was not easy, and the great pulses and bounds of progress so many in directions all simultaneous that the co-ordination is indefinitely future, give a kind of *drumming background* of life.[31]

In Langston Hughes's and other modernists' articulation of jazz consciousness, the "background" drumming of Jamesian cognition meets with the foregrounded rhythms of jazz to produce an art form exemplifying modern life; that is, both as an artistic *reflection* of modern pulse, and as a practical example of that pulse. If an improviser is successful through a skilled navigation of uncertainty, then that improviser is also modeling the very means of survival so necessary in modernity yesterday and today. Hughes elaborated on his philosophy of living in his second autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander:*

> I have discovered in life that there are ways of getting almost anywhere you want to go, if you *really* want to go. You might have to squeeze through a knothole, humble yourself, or drink muddy tea from consumptive bowls or eat camel sausage, pass for Mexican, or take that *last* chance, but—well, if you really want to get there, that's the way it is. If you want to see the world, or eat steaks in fine restaurants with white tablecloths, write honest books, or get in to see your sweetheart, you do such things by taking a chance. Of course a boom may fall and break your neck at any moment, your books may be barred from libraries, or the camel sausage may lead to a prescription of arsenic. It's a chance you take.[32]

Many of the events enumerated in the above catalogue are things that Hughes actually did, chances that he took in order to get from here to there. Given the important differences between aleatory practices in twentieth-century music and the improvisational rigor masked by fluid provisionality in jazz, Hughes nevertheless often used metaphors of chance and gambling in his descriptions of daily survival, as in the above passage, and throughout his long-jazz-poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

It is luck, both as an alluring invitation to win big and as an existential fact in life, that plays such a large role in what Jackson Lears calls the American

"vernacular culture of chance."[33] Lears provides a perceptive reading of chance in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, asserting that

> the narrator's rationalism yields to respect for randomness as he learns to emulate local tricksters and finally becomes one. His best trick is to become an invisible man. The performance creates a new universe of possibilities for himself and for his audience. . . . *Invisible Man* was a sustained performance by a trickster who opened the portals of chance to unfolding discoveries, and who won his humanity by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat.[34]

Ellison, friends with but of a younger generation than Hughes, nevertheless codifies ideas central to Hughes's work in *Invisible Man*. And while Lears's assessment of the novel might seem like a prescription to embrace that dangerously attractive but quintessentially American figure of the con-man, what Lears is getting at is the way in which Ellison—via artists like Hughes—has seized upon the *art of improvisation as a tool for survival*.[35] There are con men and there are con men; as the poet-philosopher Plato warned, all poets are liars.

Improvising from the African-American artistic perspective, too, we must remember, is not merely a matter of swindling a chump or making a fast buck. It is a means of communication by signifyin(g)—"the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story" in Ellison's definition—encoding truths that are, as Ellison says, "lies."[36] But the ambivalence in this theory of chance—the con-man as crook versus the artist as con-man—should also remind us that improvisation in theory and practice is never inherently "good" or "bad." In the right hands, it is, however, a crucial tool for both aesthetic innovation and ethical and political maturity. This also reminds us of the potential improvisational aspects of "aleatory" music, and how the best improvisers to some extent always rely on luck.

As Giles Gunn puts it in a review of Lears's *Something for Nothing: Luck in America:*

> the trick intellectually was not to confuse the stopping places of reflection, sometimes called ideas, with the movements between and among and beyond them. Life is in the transitions, [William] James contended, and all our conclusions [are] merely provisional and in need of correction. In life's unfinished trajectory, we learn where we are and what we should be about only by betting that the consequences of our and others' actions can in some sense be measured, can to some degree be assessed, chiefly by, as in a democracy, imaginatively putting ourselves in the place of those who might be most affected by them.[37]

Hughes's life as a writer can be seen as a series of such empathetic gestures, from his aforementioned socialist anthems to his popular and populist Simple stories. Charting the movements of possibility through his art, Hughes seized

upon the variegated energies of modernism even as he focused on the localized day-to-day life of Harlem.

In recounting the frequent walks that Hughes used to take through his neighborhood, his secretary and literary executor George Bass was astonished to find that Hughes seemed to have missed most of the local activity in the streets. "What *did* you see?" asked Bass. Hughes answered with a wink, "I saw everything you didn't see."[38] As he states in the prefatory note to his contribution in the canon of Modernist long poems—dedicated to Ralph and Fanny Ellison—*Montage of a Dream Deferred:*

> In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop—this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of a jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition. (387)

Thus the jazz consciousness of Hughes's work indicates not a simplified depiction of jazz and black culture in general as a comfortable meeting place for all voices, but rather a watchful and provisional snapshot of the quicksilver predicaments of daily life.

Jazz consciousness, steeped in the lessons of improvisation, becomes an important example of potential cross-cultural and global community-building. Modernism was shot through with the globalization we often speak of as a phenomenon of the last few decades. And like some versions of that globalization, modernism harbored the contradictory impulses of nativism, racism and other essentialisms that turned its liberatory energies into the fearful dynamo of world wars, genocides, and crumbling empires in which we are still caught. Langston Hughes stands as a crucial example of a modernist artist who rose to the challenge of balancing the local with the global, the private with the public, and the oral and aural roots of his craft with the scripted sensibilities of modernist writing.

By engaging in the musical dimensions of African-American aesthetics, Hughes was able to tap into the important systems of signification that had sustained his culture through times of crisis when direct language—or even literacy itself—was forbidden. Yet he also importantly focused on *writing* as a craft and as a profession—even when he was writing about music—thus asserting the importance of scripted cultures in conjunction with aural cultures in African-American aesthetics. As Aldon Nielsen points out in *Black Chant*, the well-meaning scholarly focus on orality in African-American art "will still miss a great deal that black poets are doing and have always done" and will ignore the fact that "chant, and indeed all orature, bodies itself forth in the garb of the mark, inscription, calligraphy. Orature is not opposed to

writing; lecture is not opposed to listening."[39] Hughes's attention to the visual as well as the aural, and the ways in which those categories are interconnected, place him in line with other modernists interested in the techniques of collage and visual art, and remind us that improvisation is a part of all of those media.

Hughes's work was founded on a belief that black culture in all its diversity was a worthy subject of art, and because so much of his work was infused with the musical life of black America, it offered an important version of the potentially liberatory energies of improvisation. It also offered, as Josh Kun has shown, an increasingly nuanced view of the arbitrary nature of race, even as Hughes remained committed to speaking for (and about the oppression done to) the various non-Anglo peoples around the world.[40] During his high school days in Cleveland, Hughes experienced the particularity of being black in America, and how even other oppressed groups were not discriminated against in the ways in which African Americans were. But he also saw early on that oppression was not limited to white versus black, and that class, education, and political persuasion were important in the outcome of his life's journey. "I went to my first symphony concert with a Jewish girl," he writes in *The Big Sea,* "for these children of foreign-born parents were more democratic than native white Americans, and less anti-Negro."[41] As a boy Hughes for a short time even sold a socialist newspaper, *The Appeal To Reason*.[42]

These early socialist and pan-racial perspectives would stay with Hughes throughout his life—despite his having significantly revised opinions about his early socialist days—and would, along with the music he loved so dearly, comprise the "strategic universalism" of his artistic work. For Hughes, jazz both comments on and exemplifies the Jamesian flow of experience and demonstrates that being able to exist within "a community in transition" as Hughes put it, is a sign of the music's central role in bringing about the reality of justice inherent in the "dream deferred."

II. "In a Troubled Key": Hughes's Musical Education

I wish I could write music. I'd leave words alone.

Langston Hughes

We have seen how Ezra Pound's work, as distant from jazz and jazz improvisation as it was, was still connected with the currents of improvisation in the music of his time. For Hughes, the central improvisational tradition of twentieth-century music—jazz—was probably the most important thing in his life outside of writing, and much of his writing is concerned with jazz and related musical forms. In terms of improvisation from a literary perspective—that is, in the process and publication history of Hughes's work—he certainly fits the definition of improviser as much as Ezra Pound did. Hughes wrote

much and often, and his work encompasses a similarly diverse range of genres and techniques as Pound's: poetry, plays, libretti, essays, reviews, novels, letters, and short stories. Within and between these genres Hughes revised and reshuffled riffs—the thematic material as much as the actual diction and syntax—to create a body of work that, like the African-American music which was the genesis for so much of Hughes's work, called and responded to itself through the years. And we have seen how Hughes's "jazz consciousness" and his attention to the provisionality of daily life place him in a genealogical tree of African-American improvisers stretching from the earliest black explorers to the modern day MC.

Hughes was a jazz and blues poet. But was he a musical improviser? In terms of writing or performing actual music on an instrument, as the epigraph to this section entails, Hughes was not a musician. His family had connections with the entertainment world, and his mother had had pretensions of being an actress; "Her failure to enter the professional theater," says Rampersad, "began to unhinge her; she became theatrical."[43] Hughes heard music early and often, but was not, as he asserted later, "a performer": "I have always been in love with show business. If I were a performer, I thought, and could play or sing or dance my way to Hong Kong and Singapore and Calcutta and Bombay, I would never go home at all. But I was not a performer, only a writer, so I had to think about heading for the U.S.A."[44]

But Hughes *did* perform his poetry with musicians. Moreover, his lifelong interest in music put him in constant contact with an eclectic mix of some of the finest musicians and composers of the twentieth century—W. C. Handy, Duke Ellington, Kurt Weill, Nina Simone, Louis Armstrong, Randy Weston, Hazel Scott, Charles Mingus, and Tony Scott, to name a few—but he was probably not more than superficially familiar with the piano he kept at his final permanent residence in Harlem. He owned Afrodiasporic hand drums, and wrote of his return to the U.S. from a 1931 trip to Haiti: "We had to pawn my camera and everything else, except the two Haitian voodoo drums we had lugged from the Cap. These drums we would not part with under any circumstances."[45] The tenor of his comments about drums on this trip indicates the general respect and interest he had for music around the world, especially when he could identify in it some connection to African-American culture.

For Hughes—even though he was seriously interested in Western art classical music—the most meaningful music usually meant music that was rejected by mainstream or upper-class culture, black or white. While in Haiti, after purchasing the drums, he recounted that "One day Zell and I sat on the inner balcony around the courtyard, pounding away on two big voodoo drums we had bought, trying to learn to play them with our bare fingers as the Haitians do. Just when we were beginning to master a simple rhythm, the [black] manager came rushing up the stairs scolding us in his polite French . . . 'Drums are not for gentlemen, anyway.' "[46] But for Hughes the musical and social

implications of the drums and their players were precisely what he went to Haiti to find: "I was afraid that someone might recognize my name or know my poetry, for I did not want to be lionized in Haiti, nor have my days filled with invitations to dine with people who could not play drums."[47] As Josh Kun relates in his discussion of Hughes's Latin/o and Caribbean connections, it was traveling between Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, and the United States that caused Hughes to have a fuller picture of how race could be absurdly but effectively articulated as an instrument of social control, even within one's own group.[48]

Crucially, it is through music that Hughes developed his various senses of human relations, and it is often through music that he was able to take decisive action in his personal life. Music in his memoirs often figures as a catalyst for action and an agent of nonverbal communication. For example, after several weeks of festive elbow-rubbing with fellow modernists in Paris in the summer of 1937, Hughes claims that it is the promise of music that finally gets him to go to the front lines of the Spanish Civil War: "When I learned in Valencia that La Nina was still singing in Madrid under fire, I decided it was time I got my permit validated for the front." [49] The presence of this "gypsy" music, originally brought in its germinal forms by the Roma people into Spain centuries back, was a sign of hope for Hughes just as the presence of the blues was, in the depths of American ghettos and sharecropping plantations: "I found the strange, high, wild crying of . . . flamenco in some ways much like the primitive Negro blues of the deep South. The words and music were filled with heartbreak, yet vibrant with resistance to defeat, and hard with the will to savor life in spite of its vicissitudes."[50]

While he lived and traveled in Central Asia during 1932, Hughes's jazz records brought together a motley crew, described by Hughes as a touching tableau of socialist camaraderie:

> So, with a roaring fire, pretty Nina Zaratelli modeling in the center of the room, the nice old Russian lady serving chicken and blintzes, my Harlem victrola playing Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong and Ethel Waters—plus Uzbek athletes demonstrating handsprings, and Red Army men, local authors and native university students, both girls and boys, paying calls—my convalescence was anything but dull.[51]

If James Baldwin, writing years later of his sojourn in Switzerland where he learned to love the deep blues of his native culture, had to go abroad to "discover what it means to be American," then Langston Hughes's journeys and their soundtracks taught him what it meant to be a citizen of the world, and how his own native culture could be a force for social good as much as it could be entertainment.[52]

Thus one of the only negative things Hughes would write about the Soviet Union in *I Wonder as I Wander,* and significantly, one reason he would give for his hesitation to officially join the Communist Party, would be the following humorous and insightful anecdote:

> Once I gave as my reason for not joining the Party the fact that jazz was officially taboo in Russia, being played only at the déclassé Metropol hotel, and very badly there. "But jazz is decadent bourgeois music," I was told, for that is what the Soviet press had hammered into Russian heads. "It's my music," I said, "and I wouldn't give up jazz for a world revolution." The Russians looked at me as if I were a decadent bourgeois writer and let it go at that. But they liked my jazz records as much as I did, and never left the room when I played them.[53]

While not officially a part of the Cold War program to use jazz as America's "secret sonic weapon," Hughes's frequent travels often displayed the same ironies that the State Department-organized jazz tours did. Hughes's deployment of American jazz recordings and his own erstwhile readings of blues poetry from Havana to Tokyo were an indication of the connections that he and his audiences around the world were making between oppression in the United States and oppression abroad, and a testament to the revolutionary potential of this music that was so important to him. Later, actual jazz tours might include integrated bands, but this did not mean that democracy at home was working. Paul Austerlitz reminds us that "while some critics might laud jazz's aesthetic 'integration' [in terms of musical styles and the different kinds of people who play them] as an epitome of 'American Democracy' . . . the inclusiveness of jazz is *atypical* of dominant trends in the United States, that developed as a *counterforce* to racial polarization."[54]

As Penny Von Eschen relates in her history of the Cold War jazz tours,

> The claim on the part of critics, and later the State Department, that jazz embodied a unique American freedom transcending race collided with many musicians' experiences of jazz as deeply embedded in African-American history and cultural practices. Black artists jumped into the fray in these debates, invoking what Paul Gilroy has called a black counterculture of modernity . . . State Department officials frequently tried to shield the integrationist and modernist imagery of the tours from crucial audiences at home. Perhaps, in some minds, the tour evoked the cultural radicalism of an earlier popular-front culture.[55]

Langston Hughes, carting around records and a victrola to play them on practically everywhere he traveled, was part of that earlier popular-front culture. This culture was the leftist version of the "jazz consciousness" that Hughes would embody throughout his life: utopian in spirit but committed to action on the ground, and allowing many players in the band, many voices in the chorus.

The only trouble was that Hughes couldn't sing. As he recalled in *The Big Sea:*

> The blues poems I would often make up in my head and sing on the way to work. (Except that I could never carry a tune. But when I sing to myself, I think I am singing.) One evening, I was crossing Rock Creek Bridge, singing a blues I was trying to get right before I put it down on paper. A man passing on the

> opposite side of the bridge stopped, looked at me, then turned around and cut across the roadway.
> He said: "Son, what's the matter? Are you ill"
> "No," I said. "Just singing."
> "I thought you were groaning," he commented. "Sorry!" And went his way.
> So after that I never sang my verses aloud in the street any more.[56]

This episode shows us that Hughes knew *having* the blues didn't mean he could *sing* the blues. Ossie Davis even quipped that "we thought we could read his poetry better than Langston could."[57] On the other hand, jazz pianist and composer Randy Weston claimed that "[Hughes] was truly a musician, as far as I am concerned . . . He had a beautiful way of making everything seem so simple, so easy. For a man as great as he was, his sheer ease was something to behold."[58]

As we have seen, Hughes did not, by his own admission, play any instrument or sing to any degree of technical proficiency. But this deficiency in "actual" musical ability was perhaps what made him work so hard to be a professional writer, and to write so much *about* music. The circumstances behind his becoming a poet were caught up, according to Hughes, in the uneasy assumptions connecting music and race. While Rampersad suggests that "His election to class poet [in elementary school] probably had less to do with rhythm and race than with his perceived merits and popularity" and that Hughes was writing verse before the following episode described in *The Big Sea,* Hughes's origin myth shows us that in his mind there was a definite nonmusical basis for his *writing,* even though his classmates thought he was a natural-born hipster*:*

> I was the Class Poet. It happened like this. They had elected all the class officers, but there was no one in our class who looked like a poet, or had ever written a poem. There were two Negro children in the class, myself and a girl. In America, most white people think, of course that *all* Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm. So my classmates, knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously—thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro.[59]

Yet ironically, Hughes often described his compositional technique in terms that could also describe jazz improvisation: "poems came to me spontaneously, from somewhere inside . . . I put the poems down quickly on anything I had at hand when they came into my head, and later I copied them into my notebook."[60] Concerning the composition of his earliest published and most famous poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, he writes that "No doubt I changed a few words the next day, or maybe crossed out a line or two. But there are seldom many changes in my poems, once they're down . . . poems are like rainbows: they escape you quickly."[61] As Arnold Rampersad and Josh Kun relate in their descriptions of the poem's genesis, its theme of temporal and metaphysical fluidity cast in a metaphor of rivers was itself discovered as Hughes was traveling over the Mississippi River in a moving train.[62] The poem

offers a triple motion of *e*motions, then: the improvisational inspiration of Hughes's words, the motion of the train, and the motion of the river beneath the train.

Of another well-known poem, the meta-blues *The Weary Blues,* Hughes states, "I could not achieve an ending I liked, although I worked and worked on it—something that seldom happens to any of my poems."[63] Possibly Hughes couldn't write in his standard, fluid style because he himself was not in motion that winter—he was stuck working on a fleet of permanently harbored boats on an icy Hudson river.[64] It is clear that Hughes revised and edited like most good writers—as he recounts in the tale of writing his first novel in *The Big Sea*—but it seems likely from his own accounts of his poetic practice that when he was writing *poetry*, he was often engaged in what Philip Pastras describes as the most elemental of the three categories of literary improvisation—"as a *mode* of composition, when the writing becomes spontaneous on its own, without regard to the intentions or to the working habits of the writer (in other words, what most writers and critics call 'inspiration')."[65]

Not content to be silent and unmusical despite his lack of musical talent, Hughes decided to fill his writing with music, and insofar as was possible, to make his words music. As he wrote in the poem *To Make Words Sing*: "To make words sing / Is a wonderful thing— / Because in a song / Words last so long" (602). This is an interesting combination of the old desire for immortality through verse mixed with the figure of a song—which will fade as soon as its sound ends. But perhaps, like the blues he heard as a child and which still fueled his imagination, Hughes could craft his songs well enough to be fluid and musical but also unforgettable. Later I will further detail some of Hughes's reading and performing practices and the ways in which he interacted with jazz musicians. But first I will turn to that improvisational style at the heart of Hughes's poetic and personal life: the blues.

Blues Imagism and Bluesnik Poetics

I. Getting Down with the Blues People

Hughes's interest in blues as a music is intimately connected to his awareness of the novelty of the language and the narratives of the blues. In the late 1950s, when Hughes had already long since made his mark as a blues poet, a British jazz critic named Francis Newton wondered why more writers hadn't yet picked up on the linguistic possibilities of blues and jazz music:

> Among negro writers jazz has naturally been more influential, though even among them only a few, notably Langston Hughes, have been seriously and consistently influenced by the blues. Much of Hughes's writings is plain blues, such as might be composed and sung by any guitar-picker . . . Hughes is pretty

> consistently aware of jazz and the blues as components of American negro life; but even among writers of his people this awareness was not always habitual.
>
> This paucity and poverty of jazz literature is all the more extraordinary since, as we have seen, the world of jazz is, at the very least, fantastically good "copy" for any writer with an interest in human beings, while jazz itself has produced at least two types of literature of value: the poetry of the blues, and the talked autobiography; not to mention the literary experimentalism of "jive talk."[66]

Newton also noted:

> But even as a verbal skeleton [i.e. taken away from the music] the blues are a literary achievement of considerable importance, and so far the most important nonmusical by-product (or rather nonmusical aspect) of jazz.[67]

While Newton's perception of the literary scene surrounding jazz also takes note of the Beat movement occurring as he was writing, he seizes upon Hughes as a primary example of the aesthetic and political benefits of blues writing. And it is no coincidence that Newton would find common cause with black American music, or with a blues poet who was affiliated with socialist and communist causes: "Francis Newton" was the jazz critic pseudonym of leftist historian Eric Hobsbawm, and his 1959 book *The Jazz Scene* is one of the earliest book-length attempts in English to seriously write about jazz from a sociological perspective, as opposed to the fan-based, record-collector-among-the-cognoscenti criticism which Hughes would make fun of in his "Liner Notes for the Poetically Unhip" at the end of *Ask Your Mama* (526–531). And Hobsbawm recognizes in Hughes what Hughes recognized in the blues when he first started experimenting with *writing* the blues back in the 1920s: that it would "make good 'copy' for any writer interested in human beings."

Hughes saw in the blues not only a music that could sustain him through rough times, but also a *literary form* that could shape and be shaped by poetry. It cannot be overstated that the language and form of the blues are simply one of the most important *literary*, as well as musical developments of the twentieth century. The blues as a musical style and the blues as a literary form set the standard for most American popular music of the twentieth century, not to mention the influence of the blues as a metaphysical concept. Many authors have written seriously about the blues throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.[68] Yet due to the lingering effects of racism, and, paradoxically, the success of the blues as a form, the music seems so simple and unsophisticated to many people that the full significance of Langston Hughes's blues experiments in the literary realm remain undervalued.

In the standard narrative of jazz history the blues are viewed not as a continually evolving form in their own right, but as the roots of jazz—the wellsprings that jazz returns to when its intellectualism sucks out all the life in the music. The blues are the steady heartbeat or ghostly soul that a musician must draw on in order to be truly authentic. This is the kind of discourse that many

justifiably bluesy musicians themselves use to discuss the music—from Miles Davis to Wynton Marsalis—and while there is much positive potential in this narrative, it neglects the actual working reality of contemporary blues musicians who are, like many working jazz musicians (indeed, they often *are*, also, jazz musicians), revising old forms in constantly evolving and metamorphic ways.[69]

Musically speaking, the blues are "simpler" than most jazz standards to perform on an instrument, but that does not mean they are simpler to perform *well* or *convincingly*. Steven C. Tracy's book *Langston Hughes and the Blues* still remains the definitive book-length subject on Hughes's blues work, and in the present chapter I hesitate to make any claims beyond the deep historical insights which Tracy and other scholars specifically interested in Hughes's blues poetry and influences have already made. What I am interested in is how the blues for Hughes operated as a central axis of improvisational theory and practice. At the risk of falling into the "blues-as-primitive" trap, then, my overarching concern lies in the specific improvisational elements of Hughes's poetry and musical collaborations, rather than the formal features of the blues which can be found and musically analyzed in his poetry. Again, we should recall that it is difficult to conveniently separate blues from jazz, which is the whole point of again foregrounding how crucial the blues are to African-American musical forms in general, as well as their role in forming the wider American cultural imagination.

Hughes was certainly not the first to write down the blues, but he was arguably the first significant Modernist poet to fully develop the blues form on the printed page.[70] He also developed an aesthetic of blues writing that allowed him to write the blues while also *writing about* the blues in the same poem—*The Weary Blues* being the most relevant example—and thus creating a meta-blues criticism while writing the blues. The poem's speaker elucidates the meaning of a musical encounter he has "Down on Lenox Avenue the other night" (50). The "drowsy syncopated tune" which he hears begins to seep into the text of the narrative he is speaking, as if recalling the event and embodying the song are one and the same. Describing the musician, the speaker says:

> By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
> He [i.e., the bluesman] did a lazy sway
> He did a lazy sway
> To the tune o' those weary blues.
> With his ebony hands on each ivory key
> He made that poor piano moan with melody.
> O Blues!
>
> (50)

By this point we do not know whether the speaker has shouted the apostrophe of "O Blues!" or if he is ventriloquizing the song of the bluesman. The repetition of "He did a lazy sway" imitates the repeated AAB form of a blues

stanza, even as the speaker goes in and out of a free verse line structure. Later on in the poem the speaker places quotation marks around the actual blues song, as if now more in control of the reverie—of which the initial recollection was too powerful for a linear narrative to contain. The speaker imitates the patting of the bluesman's foot on the floor, keeping time with a "Thump, thump, thump," and this onomatopoeia blends into the sound of the last three lines of the poem: "The singer stopped playing and went to bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. / He slept like a rock or a man that's dead" (50). We can imagine the thump of the foot-become-rock as a metaphor for the man's weary head hitting the pillow on his bed.

First published in 1925, this poem won a poetry prize for Hughes and displayed the deep connections he had with blues.[71] Not coincidentally, the actual folk blues song, "The Weary Blues," was the first blues Hughes recalled hearing in his life. Rampersad describes the moment Hughes heard the blues in Kansas city as a boy:

> At an open air theatre on Independence Avenue, from an orchestra of blind musicians, Hughes first heard the blues . . . Between the church and the blues singers, and in spite of his youth and his cloistered life with [Grandmother] Mary Langston, the world of black feeling and art opened before Langston. He neither felt religion nor could sing the blues, and yet both the religious drama and the secular music soothed and diverted him from his sense of solitude. They also alerted him to a power and a privacy of language residing in the despised race to which he belonged; approaching the church and the blues as an outsider . . . Langston only respected them more.[72]

Hughes's engagement with the blues as a form of "low-down" speech puts him in a tradition of English poets who sought "authentic expression" from the music of the lower classes. If white modernists frequently went slumming as primitivist hep-cats, then Hughes was also traveling "down," as Ann Douglas has described, when he focused his aesthetic on blues people.[73] The reasons for this go beyond Hughes's genuine respect and at least implicit cultural connections with the music of the black lower class. Hughes was like a twentieth century Wordsworth or Coleridge, striving to "ascertain how far" as Wordsworth put it, "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure."[74]

Wordsworth and Coleridge, working and walking in the Lake District, imagined a folk song revolution for English poetry back in 1798, as in *The Thorn*: " . . . some will say / She hanged her baby on the tree, / Some say she drowned it in the pond . . . When'er you look on it, 'tis plain / The baby looks at you again."[75] The gothic imagery of the English countryside, reeling with the early effects of the industrial revolution, brought to poetry the "real language of men in a state of vivid sensation," according to Wordsworth, and formed the song-structures of *Lyrical Ballads*.[76] Consider, too, Wordsworth's famous formula—"I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility"—and how he elaborates on it:

> Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions.[77]

There are obvious differences between the eighteenth-century poetics of England's bard of the sublime and the twentieth-century poetics of America's bard of Harlem, but consider Hughes's description of the blues in comparison to Wordsworth's description of the "blind association of pleasure" provided by "harmonious metrical language" which "temper[s] the painful feeling" of "the deeper passions": "The Blues are genuine folk-songs born out of heartache . . . [yet] there's almost always something humorous about them—even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying."[78]

He was more insistent in *The Big Sea*:

> Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night—day, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, its rooted power.[79]

I will later discuss Hughes's blues poetry as "blues imagism," pointing to a more contemporaneous connection to other modernisms, as opposed to Romanticisms. But Hughes's blues and Wordsworth's ballads share at least two common roots, in that: 1) the English ballad forms which Wordsworth sought to distill in his poetry contributed significantly to the folk music of the United States, and were adapted and adopted by countless singers in the hills and backwoods of America—black and white singers alike. This music was the European-born improvised singing and playing that would link together with other American styles to create "old time" music; and 2) both Wordsworth and Hughes self-consciously sought language which would generate new possibilities for their poetic art, and both poets found such language in the music and poetic speech of the folk. Larry Scanlon, articulating other links between Hughes and Wordsworth, has even remarked that the blues voices of Hughes's poetry make it seem "as if Wordsworth came back as a blues singer."[80]

Thus, as Aldon Nielsen's call for renewed attention to black *writing* reminds us, black poets of Harlem (and not just Winston Churchill's Harlem Renaissance-poet-of-choice, Claude McKay) manipulated and refashioned the heritage of English poetics as much as the Anglo-Modernists did.[81] The connections between different forms of improvisation which influenced these older poetics

places Hughes in line with the other poets in this study, as well. Rampersad's illumination of a striking event in *The Big Sea* confirms as much—as he boarded the ship that would carry him across the Atlantic to Africa for the first time, Hughes ponders what to do with his baggage:

> One item in Langston's luggage set him apart from the rest of the crew. He was taking with him a box of books, mostly the detritus of his year at Columbia and the mark of his devotion from childhood to the lonely world of the written word. Suddenly, as he later recalled, he felt a powerful sense of revulsion at all that books had meant in his life. Leaning over the rail, he pitched them one by one into the darkness; with each he felt a burden fly away.[82]

In the opening scene of *The Big Sea,* Hughes says of this act that "it was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart when I threw the books into the water."[83] But what he fails to mention, and what Rampersad reveals by quoting an excised portion of the autobiographical tale, is that Hughes saved one of his books: ". . . he had also kept the symbol of his best self, and of what he hoped to be. He saved his copy of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: 'I had no intention of throwing that one away.' "[84] Whitman was a bard whose songs lived on even in the most unsuspected places, and whose influence could crop up even after much resistance, as Ezra Pound related in his poem, "A Pact." After he returned from Africa, Hughes would publish his own response to Whitman's call—"I, Too." Confident in his new voice that would harness the blues roots of a vital American music culture, Hughes could write: "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother" (46).

Hughes's musical aesthetic was thus a combination of many influences, and the improvisational threads woven through his work originated in the complex songs of African-American blues and jazz, the rhythms of Afrodiasporic drumming, and the bardic tradition which Whitman assumed when Emerson challenged American artists to make it new in the nineteenth century: improvisation as self-creation, digging the roots of music to make a future song. I'll now turn to a discussion of Hughes's future songs, and how his blues aesthetic linked up with the modernist imagism advocated by Ezra Pound.

II. Fragments of a Dream Deferred

> *To great writers, finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in closure, feeling that their lives have thereby been given back to them. For the genius each caesura, and the heavy blows of fate, fall like gentle sleep itself into his workshop labor. Around it he draws a charmed circle of fragments. "Genius is application."*
>
> *Walter Benjamin, "Standard Clock" from* One-Way Street

In this section I will discuss how Hughes used the blues as a kind of imagist fragment, to be shuffled and manipulated as parts of longer provisional poetic structures. Within a blues and meta-blues framework, Hughes developed his own version of modernist imagism, which I dub *blues imagism*. By blues imagism I mean the poems which have the usual markers of imagism as laid out by Pound, et al., but which also depend upon the ironic detachment and humor—and sometimes the formal features—characteristic of the blues. Larry Scanlon describes Hughes, in his manipulation of the spirit and form of the blues, as "less interested in demonstrating the capacity of poetic meter to capture blues rhythm than in articulating what we might legitimately call a blues sublime."[85] As a poetic form, then, not all of Hughes's blues poems necessarily can be said to be Blues Imagist poems. But what Hughes achieved with these poems was to distill the essential ingredients in blues songs into poems which could be assembled into linked fragmentary chains creating fluid poetic structures.

Like a blues song itself which can have an infinite amount of choruses and can always be about the abstract concept of "the blues" while at the same time trenchantly commenting on life's vicissitudes, Hughes used the blues to weave together the visual and aural network of poems that made up the best of his work—especially evident in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, published in 1951. Hughes scholar and blues musician Steven C. Tracy claims that the "images of [Hughes's] poems are not as startling as those of some of the most imaginative blues performers, like Robert Johnson or Peetie Wheatstraw, nor as striking as some of the traditional lyrics . . . However, Hughes makes his special contribution in the area by exploring the ways in which the oral and written traditions can be applied and intertwined to great effect."[86] I would like to emphasize some of Hughes's more striking imagery, however, and demonstrate how this imagery makes Hughes an imagist poet as well as a ready improviser in terms of his deployment of the fragment—a crucial component of the fluidity of both *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and his own performance of his poems as metamorphic groups.

The fragment as I am here defining it, as a concept in poetry, relates to classical texts which existed only in literal papyrus fragments salvaged from ancient libraries or recopied and saved on the pages of medieval manuscripts. The aphoristic poem, koan, or epigram also could be said to be a fragment, a distilled essence of some larger possible universe of text and commentary. But fragmentation takes on a new meaning in the modernist period, most famously in Eliot's *Waste Land*, where civilization's core texts have been destroyed by war and the speaker's voice is itself fragmented into a dizzying array of allusion, ventriloquism, and ellipsis. Fragments are possible bits of a larger formula, ingredients in a catalogue or a spell to be cast. And for Pound, they are images which turn into vortices of meaning, luminous details that can become shorthand for whole histories. These bits can be linked together to form the chain of a long poem in the improvisational mode, as I have detailed in terms of Pound's *Cantos* in the previous chapter.

Steven Tracy and Craig Werner have both noted that despite important aesthetic and culturally-rooted differences, the short poems by Hughes in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* are akin to Poundian imagism and the network of images and fragments linked together in the *Cantos*.[87] And while Tracy stresses that the texts in Hughes's modernist long poem in the improvisational mode may not all be intentionally "spontaneous creations"—what Pastras calls the *discipline* of improvisation—I believe they demonstrate the same kind of improvisational characteristics that I have traced in Pound's work.[88] Hughes's aforementioned typical procedure of poetic composition—writing in a *mode* of improvisation, where the poem is created through inspiration with little revision afterwards—along with the subject matter of the poems (often *about* music or crafted on musical forms like the blues) show that these are fragments both about and of improvisational practice.

Tracy gives a well-articulated hypothetical musical analysis of the "boogie-woogie" poems of *Montage*, setting the poem *Dream Boogie* over an imaginary chord progression and tracing the boogie poems musically and thematically throughout the larger text.[89] Like the voices in *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*, and like the proliferation of voices within Hughes's earlier poems—starting at least as early as 1925 in "The Weary Blues"—*Montage of a Dream Deferred* lives up to the "montage" in its title: it is a visual and, metaphorically, an *aural* collage, as well as a series of snapshots and snatches of song. We cannot hear the sounds and voices all together, but the effect of the repeated themes, words, and onomatopoeia like "re-bop" and "be-bop" contribute to a verbal imitation of the "conflicting changes, sudden nuances" and other features which Hughes ascribed to the music which influenced the poem (387).

Describing the speakers in Hughes's poetry, Larry Scanlon suggests that ". . . no less than Eliot or Pound, Hughes's blues singer places himself in the center of a profusion of discursive structures, revaluing inherited forms according to the exigencies of modern experience."[90] Again, as was begun in earlier socialist verse like *Chant for May Day* (209), *Broadcast on Ethiopia* (192), and the multiple voices of street and nightlife conversation in poems like *The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.)* (89), in the *Montage* Hughes has presented a modernist poem comprised of a "profusion of discursive structures."

This "profusion of discursive structures" not only links Hughes to other modernists who used collage techniques in their poems. It also demonstrates the way in which the blues form itself can be manipulated as a sort of never-ending improvisational tool; each blues being structured the same yet always offering room for an individual to create new phrases, imagery, and meaning into the that structure. Additionally, since Hughes—as we have seen in a poem like *The Weary Blues*—also created a meta-blues format in which he could use the structure of actual blues songs within a larger poetic form, his long-poem form is akin to the "formless form" which Pound developed for the *Cantos*.

In other words, in order to capture the "community in transition," as Hughes described in the epigraph to *Montage*, he would combine old song forms, haiku-like fragments, and other poetic structures into a continuously metamorphic structure.

If the blues as a form was nevertheless somewhat limited in terms of its improvisational potential, compared to, for example, a long "blowing" solo in the form associated with be-bop and post-bop jazz, then Hughes also was able to use the blues as part of a larger repertoire of improvisational techniques in order to fully capture the movements of life. So Hughes's *Montage*, then, is improvisational in its structure in two ways: by using the blues as a form, which itself has a modular, formulaic design, compact and yet loose; and by using the blues as part of the larger network of poetic fragments in the poem as a whole.

A sample of the poems from *Montage* shows that Hughes's blues imagism could be as striking as the other modernist imagist texts, if different from the urban and country blues singers he emulated. In *Necessity* we find a speaker posing a sarcastic answer to an unheard question regarding his employment:

> Work?
> I don't have to work.
> I don't have to do nothing
> but eat, drink, stay black, and die.
> This little old furnished room's
> so small I can whip a cat
> without getting fur in my mouth.
>
> (392)

Such a folk idiom as that of the last two lines would surely be the envy of the blackfaced Pound and Eliot.

Further along in the sequence, we get a display of, and a poem titled, *Neon Signs*—with minimum commentary on their meaning, excepting the dots printed in diamond shapes to represent the flickering glow of city marquees. On one sign with commentary, Hughes achieves a fitting Blues Image:

> MINTON'S
> (ancient altar of Thelonious)
>
> (397)

Minton's was, by the publication of the poem in 1951, an "old" site of the genesis of be-bop during World War Two (hence "ancient") by musicians like pianist Thelonious Monk.

There are many other examples of these blues images, all exhibiting the sarcastic and yet elegiac bite of the blues, compressed into tiny fragments.

An excursus on the delicious danger of interracial sex:

Mellow
Into the laps
of black celebrities
white girls fall
like pale plums from a tree
beyond a high tension wall
wired for killing
which makes it
more thrilling.

(405)

A depiction of the faces on Harlem's most famous street:

125th Street
Face like a chocolate bar
full of nuts and sweet.

Face like a jack-o'-lantern,
candle inside.

Face like slice of melon,
grin that wide.

(407)

And a pithy reminder of the strange meeting of the sacred and the secular in American art (in this case, black Muslim jazz musicians hoping to get a record deal):

Be-Bop Boys
Imploring Mecca
to achieve
six discs
with Decca.

(*CP* 409)

And there is of course the most famous poem from the sequence, *Harlem,* with its varying answers-which-are-also-questions to the question of the era: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? . . . Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?" (426)

If Ezra Pound were to chop up these poems and excise the unnecessary similes, they might sound even closer to the orthodox imagist fragment. But perhaps Pound saw in these poems something of his own influence, when he wrote to Hughes from St. Elizabeth's after reading a copy of *Montage* that Hughes had brought to him: "am glad to get some po'try I can read / Have yu heard / Vachel L. / did n'/ say deh / las' word."[91] The "Vachel L" here is Vachel

Lindsay, who had written an early, primitivist "jazz poem" called *The Congo*, which Edgar Lee Masters declared "Beethoven jazz with the greatest success."[92] Despite Pound's comparison to the older minstrelsy-bound poem, and despite his own blackface dialect in the letter, it is significant that he read *Montage,* liked it, and recognized that it was better than the earlier primitivist showpiece.

For Pound, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* might have been the only true African-American poetry based in jazz that he ever read. Earlier in their correspondence, Pound had noted in a 1932 letter to Hughes that "I think you were dead right in starting with the "blues" as model. AND there is nothing harder than to do a folk song once one has touched any sort of sophistication."[93] Despite the primitivism in Pound's notion of "unsophisticated folk song"—and by implication that Hughes was the sophisticated exception to the rule of black ignorance—his realization that the blues would provide a genuine form for *modern* poetry is significant, especially when other "sophisticated" African-American writers and artists were denying the validity of the blues.[94] Pound even included black folk song lyrics in a 1932 anthology of poetry he edited, entitled *Profile*. As Burton Hatlen remarks in an essay detailing the circumstances behind the anthology: "What did Pound find in these anonymous songs? In a word, he found poetry."[95]

Hughes's later correspondence, while Pound was in St. Elizabeth's, even elicited a lame jazz joke from Pound (to my knowledge, one of the only times outside of The *Cantos* where Pound referred to jazz and poetry in the same context). Responding to a Christmas card that Hughes sent in 1950 which read:

> This here
> Is a lean year
> But, Anyhow
> Christmas Cheer.[96]

Pound replied:

> Langston's Lamenting
> Loud an' long,
> Hope he gits cash
> fer his new Year song.
> (definitely not jazz, but unrealist outbreak)[97]

Had Pound come to the realization that his antiquated, racist, minstrel dialect was indeed "unrealist"? At least Hughes had managed to give Pound the *real* goods with the gift of *Montage*. Years later when Allen Ginsberg visited Pound in Italy, perhaps the elder poet had a flicker of recognition; the wild-eyed Beatnik was actually a child of the original jazz poet, the "bluesnik" who Pound had known since the days when both men—Hughes and Pound—were themselves corresponding with real "niks"; that is, communists. If "beatnik" was originally intended as a pejorative phrase for the counterculture

ruffians who were going to bring down America along with Soviet engineered satellites (Sput*nik*), then Hughes, the committed socialist who had seen more of the Communist world than most of Greenwich Village's hipsters, and who had brought jazz and blues with him to that world, was deeper than "beat"—he was a *bluesnik*.[98]

Perhaps Pound even saw his most famous imagist creation echoed in the pages of the bluesnik's beat book. In his first letter replying to Pound, back in 1932, Hughes explained: "I have known your work for more than ten years and many of your poems insist on remaining in my head, not the words, but the mood and meaning, which, after all, is the heart of the poem. I never remember 10 consecutive words of anybody's, not even my own, poems."[99] Was this one of the poems Hughes *could have* remembered (little more than 10 words, not including the title):

> *In a Station of the Metro*
> The apparitions of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[100]

In *Montage,* Hughes would write in a different city a similarly ghostly (but blues-tempered) image:

> *Chord*
> Shadow faces
> In the shadow night
> Before the early dawn
> Bops bright.
>
> (422)

Sunrise over Harlem, and the blues poet continues to ponder the dream deferred by the older generation of Ezs and Eliots and the rest.[101]

III. The Black Poet Sings: Hughes Performing the Blues

I want to turn now to a brief discussion of Hughes's collaborations with musicians, and the way in which these collaborations intersect with the issues I have raised regarding improvisation in his work.[102] In terms of his writing practice, Hughes was apparently another "drumming typist" in the vein of Pound and Kerouac. Stephen Tracy evokes Hughes pounding on his typewriter keyboard, mimicking the hard pounding of a boogie-woogie pianist as he wrote *Montage*, and given Hughes's description of the composition of the poem we can imagine such a scenario.[103] Rampersad relates that, "On September 14, [Hughes] exultantly announced his breakthrough. 'I have completed a new book I wrote last week!' he informed Arna Bontemps. 'No kidding—a full

book-length poem in five sections called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Want to see it?' "[104] Yet this is only part of the story. As Rampersad's notes to the poem in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* detail, several of the fragments from *Montage* were written and published earlier than the 1951 publication date of the entire poem, and some of the material dates back to at least 1940, earlier than the 1948 letter to Bontemps quoted above, indicating that it was certainly not published first as a single piece; nor was it all written in one burst of improvisational inspiration.[105]

But even if the typewriter-as-piano reverie of the poem is at least partially myth, the fact that Hughes republished and recycled this sequence of poems in a variety of places and spaces still points to an improvisational aesthetic at work. As when a jazz musician uses pre-learned "licks"—short melodic and rhythmic patterns—in conjunction with new material to create a coherent and innovative solo, Hughes built *Montage* in a flurry of inspiration from shorter and longer elements which themselves were sometimes created spontaneously. Thus the poems found in *Montage*, true to their nature as fragments, can be found in a variety of meaningful settings. They function as Hughes's riffs for his poetic performances, most notably the 1957 recording he made with jazz bassist, composer, and author Charles Mingus, itself reshuffling both the older blues song and the Hughes poem of the same name into a new setting for its title: *Weary Blues*.

An aesthetic dilemma of much "jazz poetry" is that the poet has to figure out how to be musical without being subsumed into the "actual" music of the accompanying musicians; in other words, how to keep the words as interesting, or at least as aesthetically effective, as the music. As Aldon Nielsen notes, "Too frequently, enamored of the ideal of improvisation, poets simply took to the stage or to the studio to declaim their creations, trusting the spirit of the moment and the musicians' ability to anticipate the text's direction, often sorely trying the sympathy of their audience."[106] This is perhaps why scat vocalizing gives in to the temptation to break the boundaries of semantic meaning into nonverbal sound; speech becomes *musical* when it is closer to the more open realm of musical, versus linguistic semantics—when it becomes sung words or even sung, nonverbal sound. Similarly, the spiritual or political messages of much jazz are sometimes lost on listeners not attuned to the particular signifiers of such meanings, because the music itself—the sound of the music—does not necessarily define itself as spiritual or rebellious. Thus even John Coltrane's composition of deep spirituality, *Psalm*, from the suite *A Love Supreme*, could be misconstrued as mere portentous, lyrical music if the listener fails to take into consideration the title of the piece and the actual psalm that is printed in the liner notes to the album and which Coltrane's saxophone rhythmically imitates in the recording.[107]

Given that Hughes was not a professional musician, and given that he was not a technically-skilled singer, were his jazz performance credentials in question? It is clear that he was a literary improviser, but was he an improviser in

terms of his poetic performances? David Yaffe, in a chapter explicating the musical and poetic dynamics of the *Weary Blues* recording, argues that Hughes was—like the Beats which he had "beaten" to the claim of "Original Jazz Poet"—insufficiently up to the task of matching his jazz compatriots: ". . . It became clear that even though Mingus was making Hughes's kind of jazz, Hughes was not necessarily writing Mingus's kind of poetry, at least not the analogue to what he was creating as a composer."[108]

Yaffe goes on to state that "Mingus's language could find common ground with Hughes's, but it was not the only territory he wanted to cover" and that "Hughes's delivery sounds stranded in another era, self-consciously delivering lyrics without the music, audibly uncomfortable with the medium of recording, even though he is widely credited as an inventor of performance poetry."[109] Of the poems included on the recording, most of them come from the text which Hughes most openly thought imitated the black music he loved, *Montage of A Dream Deferred*. But that emphasis on *imitation* is perhaps what scuttled the recording, in the ears of Yaffe and other critics. As Yaffe states, "When Hughes took on . . . the blues as a subject, he didn't merely write about the blues, he wrote the blues itself. Establishing the blues as an American poetic form is no mean feat, and yet it is precisely this direct representation that invited such harsh criticism from James Baldwin, who criticized "The Weary Blues," "which copies, rather than exploits, the cadences of the blues."[110]

Baldwin, who later softened his harsher critiques of Hughes, also noted that by the 1950s, "[Hughes] no longer created the blues—he began to *recite* the blues. The blues is a quicksilver form; if it becomes a quotation, it becomes irrelevant."[111]

Yaffe makes the case that Mingus's own poetic projects—from the lyrics he wrote for many of his compositions, to his surrealistic autobiography *Beneath The Underdog*—came from different motivations than Hughes's work, even though, as Aldon Nielsen has noted, some of Mingus's lyrics are written in a style and aesthetic similar to Hughes's poetry.[112] But what seems to me to be the larger problem is not Hughes's words, nor his ability to improvise per se. I believe that the ultimate problem that critics of the *Weary Blues* implicitly find in the recording is the simple fact that Hughes does not *sing* the blues, and that his vocal delivery seems unmusical. This is particularly clear when, as Baldwin suggests, Hughes is "quoting" the blues poems which are, formally speaking, actual blues, as in *Six-Bits Blues* (211), or in the opening track which combines *Hey, Hey* (112) and *Too Blue* (280). When Hughes reads "I got those sad old weary blues. / I don't know where to turn. / I don't know where to go. / Nobody cares about you / When you sink so low" it is hard to believe him (280).

From Yaffe's perspective, Hughes's blues do not seem honest, despite his having lived a blues-drenched life, because he sounds like he is *reading the blues*. Given his comments to Pound about not being able to remember "more

than 10 consecutive words" of poetry, even his own, and given that footage of Hughes reading with musical accompaniment shows him reading from a book, Hughes's performances were more like a musician reading a score than a soloist improvising.[113] It wasn't that he couldn't sing *well*; the problem lay in the fact that he sounded as if he couldn't even have had the blues at all. Hughes had quoted Bessie Smith in *The Big Sea,* remarking that "the trouble with white folks singing blues is that they can't get low down enough."[114] The racial coding of voices as "black" or "white" ironically plays into the perception that Hughes's blues voice was "inauthentic"—signified as "white" by Hughes's diction and cadences, themselves a reflection his educated, middle-class background. Everyone gets the blues. But we are not used to hearing middle-class, educated voices speaking them to us.

Yet I think it would be a mistake to categorically dismiss Hughes's performance. If we come to the *Weary Blues* album expecting Leadbelly or Robert Johnson, we run into the inverse of the dilemma which Countee Cullen famously posed in *Yet Do I Marvel*: "To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"[115] Cullen's speaker expresses the difficulty of being a black lyric poet in a racist American culture. But if Cullen can be a poet in the tradition of English—that is, British—poetry, then we can also grant Hughes status as a blues poet (not to mention literacy and sophistication to blues singers). Hughes's musical collaborations were a further maneuver in his life-long mission to make a uniquely black, yet also uniquely Hughes-ian poetry. The fact that he performed his blues poems—foregrounding them *as poems*, artifacts of literate, sophisticated culture—emphasizes the assertions he had made years earlier in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," advocating for an art indifferent to the scorn of white *or* black critics. And furthermore, in his performances Hughes developed his own style of "blowing," incorporating the live, improvisational methods of a musician, actor, or comedian into his personae as writer. Hughes's blues embraced the spirit of improvisational art, even though they sometimes sounded uptight. Aldon Nielsen confirms the importance of the performance, even as he acknowledges Hughes's reading style:

> There were two reasons for the high quality of Hughes's *Weary Blues* sessions. First, Mingus . . . and [Leonard] Feather had sketched the music in advance with specific Hughes texts in mind. Secondly, the Hughes poems on this recording are so deeply rooted in traditional blues forms that his recitation sounds as if he is simply reading, rather than singing, song lyrics. The next generation of black poets would take a freer approach to forming their lines, just as the next generation of musicians after Mingus would build upon his work in the creation of Free Jazz, but poets like [Amiri] Baraka would often return to Hughes's example for sustenance.[116]

Regardless of how "actually" improvisational we hear these readings, they still represent an improvisational "method" in Philip Pastras's terminology, and retain an aesthetic of improvisational and blues practices that continues

to influence contemporary jazz/poetry projects.[117] As George Lipsitz notes of the continuing battles about canon-formation in jazz historiography:

> At stake here is not just an issue of a comprehensive mainstream history versus eccentric tales told by imaginative outsiders. Our entire understanding of music and society may hinge on what kinds of histories we valorize. Christopher Small rightly urges us to learn from the great African traditions that inform jazz music, to "learn to love the creative act more than the created object" and to not let our respect for the relics of the past inhibit our capacity to create culture relevant to our own experiences. The history of jazz as creative act rather than created object can be represented in an infinitely diverse and plural number of equally true narratives.[118]

Hughes's blues performances were one version of this narrative, and Hughes's own valorization of particular histories that had been dismissed when he started developing his blues aesthetic—taking form in much of his poetry, criticism, and other writing about music—represents a major contribution to the history of blues and jazz.

And someone must have liked Hughes's reading style, beyond the poet himself. Hughes performed throughout the late 1950s with some of the most remarkable jazz musicians of his time outside of the studio. In a reading series called the "Poetry-to-Jazz Program," Hughes read to the accompaniment of: Mingus and his group; pianist and vocalist Bob Dorough (later to pen the memorable *Schoolhouse Rock* TV show songs, and sing with Miles Davis on at least one occasion); saxophonist Ben Webster; a group featuring Thelonious Monk, Wilbur Ware, bass, Kenny Dorham, trumpet, Hank Mobley, tenor saxophone, and Kenney Dennis, drums; pianist and jazz scholar Billy Taylor; trumpeter Red Allen's All-Star band; Randy Weston's group; and many times with clarinetist Tony Scott and his group. Of the latter pairing, at least one critic seemed to think that the project was a success:

> [Hughes's] deceptively simple verses, vignettes of Harlem life, were conceived in jazz rhythms, and the actual music really fills a niche which has been prepared beforehand . . . the blues behind him fairly ached . . . the various instruments adding immeasurably to the impact of the words, and the words making the music seem richer and more meaningful.[119]

On at least one occasion, Hughes improvised a poem in performance; or more accurately, he wrote it in spontaneous fashion, then performed it in the same sitting. On the last day of the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival, after a riot nearly closed down the concert proceedings on the previous day, Hughes used the blues as it so often is used –as exorcism, as catharsis:

> On the spot, as an elegy for the festival, Langston composed "Goodbye Newport Blues" . . . His elegy was quickly set to music by the pianist Otis Spann, and sung

> with feeling by Muddy Waters. Then, taking up the song, the entire group of performers joined Hughes and Waters on stage . . . Finally, at about twenty minutes to six in the evening, the seventh—and what seemed certain to be the last—Newport Jazz Festival ended to the mournful notes of his blues.[120]

Hughes's last act as a performer came at his own memorial service. He had requested that Randy Weston and his trio (drummer Ed Blackwell and bassist Bill "Vishnu" Wood) play at the ceremony, and that the last piece performed was to be Duke Ellington's *Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me*. Weston had collaborated many times with Hughes in the poet's later years, and Hughes had written a song (*African Lady*) and the liner notes for Weston's groundbreaking 1961 album *Uhuru, Afrika!* Weston's aesthetic was perhaps more suitable to Hughes's than was that of Mingus, being based in a pan-African, "strategic universalism" which echoed many of Hughes's ideas. Rampersad relates Weston's depiction of how the funeral service became a comic blues performance, courtesy of the deceased:

> [Raoul Abdul or George Bass] came up and told [Weston] it was time to start. "I said, 'Start? Well, where's the minister? Where's the preacher? Who's going to start if off?' He says '*You* start it off.' I said, '*What?*' I said, '*Me?*' He says, 'Yes, *you*!' 'Man,' I said, 'What do I talk about?' He says, 'You just tell the people about the blues you wrote last night for Langston.' I said, 'And what am I supposed to play?' He said, 'You just play anything you want to play. Just remember to end with 'Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me.' So the whole concert was blues, because Langston loved the blues. I mean, this was the wildest funeral I've ever been to in my life!"
>
> . . . Langston, Weston decided, has just been putting them on. "It was funny, really funny, it was comical, there is no other way I can describe it. And I went back into the room and looked at Langston laying there in that coffin with his arms crossed and I laughed and said, 'Man, you gotta stop putting us on like this!' Everybody was totally *out*, you know, *totally out*!"[121]

Regardless of whether or not Hughes was a good blues *singer,* he was certainly a blues master. In death he still knew how to make the music happen, and like his best blues poetry, he went *out* with wit and wonder, wandering on to realms beyond the blues.

The Abstract Truth

Hughes's first published, and still most famous, poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, echoes—the call of the later response—in the more staid, but also elegiac and elemental voice of one of his last published poems, *Flotsam*: "On the shoals of Nowhere, / Cast up—my boat, / Bow all broken, / No longer afloat. / On the shoals of Nowhere, Wasted—my song— / Yet taken by the sea

wind / And blown along" (562). The water of the rivers, transmuted into cultural memory by the bardic Negro of the earlier poem, has become the lonely sea crashing against the shoals of Nowhere: the abstract truth of the blues, proclaimed in language that Sun Ra might use. Earlier in his career, the land of Nowhere had also appeared in a moving poem addressing the urban poor called *Prayer for a Winter Night*, where the speaker imagines a place untouched by hunger and want: "They'll wake up in some rich kingdom of nowhere / Where nothingness is everything and / Everything is nothingness" (38). Nowhere as both the continuing dream deferred, but also as the Utopia of America as it could be, that "somewhere there," on the "other side of nowhere"—two phrases common to Sun Ra's cosmic liberation philosophy.[122]

This utopian space then becomes a symbol of, as Jacques Derrida would later name it, the "yet to come": where past and present are not a fixed, teleological story that has already been settled, but a narrative always potentially adaptable by the actions of the present.[123] As Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble put it, "The other side is unknowable but there nonetheless; no one can be fully sure what lies on the other side and yet it references a somewhere crucial to the dynamics of improvisatory practice."[124] Nowhere is a synonym for the critical territory which Dick Hebdige has described as "the edge," the space which Gloria Anzaldúa found in the Borderlands, or that axis of space/time which is opened up for potential change, in George Lipsitz's formulation, at the "dangerous crossroads": that abstract truth of the blues, where we learn through humor and ironic detachment that we can cry and laugh at the same time, and keep struggling despite the persistence of quotidian or gargantuan problems.[125]

Arjun Appadurai has described contemporary global life as a series of "scapes" where the "new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)."[126] While Appadurai stresses that the historical forces he is analyzing have intensified in the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, I would argue that the processes that he has given us a new theoretical language with which to map were begun at least as early as the modernist period. Furthermore, attempting to map these cultural "scapes" demands a fluidity and attention to *process*. As Appadurai writes: "we will need to ask not how these complex, overlapping, fractal shapes constitute a simple, stable (even if large-scale) system, but to ask what its dynamics are."[127] Improvisation is an embodiment of a *process-based practice*—which is a complicated way of saying that *improvisation is a process*—and a successful improviser exemplifies the type of critical understanding necessary for navigating life in general. Failing to get anywhere, Hughes gets to Nowhere, where at least his songs will be winged along by the sea winds. Hughes ends his second autobiographical work, *I Wonder as I Wander*, affirming this decision:

> So my dream was beginning to come true—to be a professional writer—and it had been my good fortune so far not to have to write anything I did not really want to write. Meanwhile, my interests had broadened from Harlem and the American Negro to include an interest in all the colored peoples of the world—in fact, in *all the people* of the world, as I related to them and they to me . . . [128]

The "abstract truth" in this section's title refers to a 1961 album by saxophonist and composer Oliver Nelson, *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*.[129] In the liner notes to the album, Nelson writes of his dissatisfaction with his musical career up until the recording session: " . . . I finally had broken through and realized that I would have to be true to myself, to play and write what *I* think is vital and, most of all, to find my own personality and identity. This does not mean that a musician should reject and shut things out. It means that he should learn, listen, absorb, and grow but retain all the things that comprise the identity of the individual himself."[130]

Perhaps the most important feature of Hughes's life and work was this "abstract truth" of the blues, the knowledge that having the blues doesn't mean you can't get satisfaction and even sociopolitical transformation by singing the blues—or in Hughes's case—writing the blues (and, as Albert Murray reminds us, "stomping the blues" away).[131] As Ruby Dee, another friend and dramatic interpreter of his works, said of Hughes, he was "a big ear." [132] This is the same kind of metaphor jazz musicians often use to describe particularly talented improvisers. A player with "big ears" is someone who can, more than demonstrating virtuosic technique, listen to the other members of an ensemble and creatively reply to what he or she hears.[133] Hughes wrote in *I Wonder as I Wander*: " . . . that is what I want to be, a writer, recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation . . . Unconsciously, in doing this I found that music helped me, and everywhere I looked for it, and listened."[134] As a listener, then, even though he might not have been the best singer, reader, or player, Hughes heard much and was able to respond in kind. His life and work indicate that he could listen with the best.

Chapter 3

Listening to Gertrude Stein's Saxophone

> *It is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested.*
>
> *T. S. Eliot*[1]

During her triumphant American lecture tour of 1934–5, reveling in the success of two of her most popular works—*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Four Saints in Three Acts*—Gertrude Stein read some of her work in a New York recording studio.[2] Included in these recordings is a poem named after one of her most famous friends, entitled *If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso*. Listening to Gertrude Stein read the poem reveals a lightness, a buoyancy in her words—"a peculiar hypnotic power," noted T. S. Eliot, like a "saxophone":

> Exactly do they do.
> First exactly.
> Exactly do they do too.
> And first exactly.
> Exactly do they do.
> And first exactly and exactly.
> And do they do.
> At first exactly and first exactly and do they do.[3]

The repetition of the three-syllable word "exactly," with stress on "act," and the syncopated phrase "do they do," is one of the highlights of twentieth-century recorded poetry. Stein's vocal timbre on the "oo" sounds of "do" and "too," combined with the hard stress on "first" and "exactly," sound to me more like scat singing than cubist painting: Gertrude Stein, crooner, turning the phrase "do they do" into "*doobie doo*." Hearing this poem come alive through Stein's voice tells us something that reading it on the page cannot convey. While this is a truism for all written poems and ideally the sign of the vestigial *mousikê* inherent in poetry, for Stein's work, it also tells us something about what her poetry is *doing*, beyond what it might be *meaning*.

For T. S. Eliot, who was no stranger to the musical potential of poetry, this was too far afield, too much of a strain from the *sense* of poetry, too much "jug jug" and not enough *shantih*. Yet in this poetry, Eliot heard the strains of his *own* strained relationship with American popular culture (specifically African-American culture): a saxophone he was too afraid to admit to playing himself,

even though he often did in his earlier career. Eliot heard Gertrude Stein playing the changes on her saxophone of language and was frustrated. As Marjorie Perloff has said of Stein's language, "the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not" and that in writing like Stein's, "[a]rt becomes play, endlessly frustrating our longing for certainty." [4] This chapter proposes that we listen again, and hear Stein's language in relation to the playing she was practicing. For this play was serious fun: it was nothing less than a charting of what Stein's one-time mentor, William James, famously described as the "stream of consciousness." It was also a sometimes irresponsible, sometimes illuminating playing-around with the complex and contradictory relationships between black and white modernisms, an element of Stein's work which I will discuss throughout the chapter. I will analyze several of Stein's texts in regard to these relationships, focusing primarily on *If I Told Him,* along with the short story *Melanctha,* the long poem *Tender Buttons,* and the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*—works that trace Stein's consistent interest in and deployment of saxophonosteinian aural effects.

Primitivism, Improvisation, Language

Of course, Stein's work *means* something(s). Words can never be completely emptied out, completely divested of their semantic meaning. Even the Dadaists knew this; ironically, their word of incantation itself now bears the weight of the twentieth-century *avant-garde*: DADA as movement, as message, as revolution, as poetic and artistic style, as history and mystery. There was even DADA in Eliot's *Waste Land*. The hidden syllables DA DA DA had been waiting to be unleashed again just a few years after they sounded in a Zurich nightclub: 1916, The Cabaret Voltaire, less than 150 miles away from the asylum in Lausanne where Eliot's convalescence would generate the text of *The Waste Land*. Of course, Eliot's DADA came from the Sanskrit syllables of Vedic prayer—*Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata*. Eliot would not have known of the rhythmic, meaningless speech used by Hindustani musicians to recite musical compositions, made from the same syllables found in Sanskrit and its linguistic progeny (Hindi, etc.). An Indian *tabla* drummer might say "*dha dha dha*" hundreds of times a day, unlocking not a prayer nor a revolution in poetry but a rhythmic cell corresponding to sounds produced on the drums themselves.

The self-proclaimed "Dada Drummer," Richard Huelsenbeck, was also after the sounds of a drum language: "My Negro poems all ended with the refrain 'Umba, umba,' which I roared and spouted over and over again into the audience."[5] Huelsenbeck's primitivized, imaginary version of African languages, chanted while "banging nonstop at the great [bass] drum, with [Hugo]

Ball accompanying him on the piano" added another sound to the Dada rhythm section, revealing Dada's desire, like most of the twentieth-century's art movements, to be Other: African, Indian, Asian, indeed, to be *musical*, or at least to have the perceived sonic magic of those others' respective cultures: the ability to invest the sounds coming out of their mouths with real power.[6]

And across the Atlantic, the woman who was dada before Dada—Samuel Sillen dubbed her "the mama of dada" in 1937—Gertrude Stein, do-they-doing/doobie-dooing: the sound of language becoming.[7] If Eliot chopped up Sanskrit syllables to shore them against the ruins of civilization, Stein and the Dadaists took similar syllables and short-circuited them, instrumentalizing language in a new way, turning syllables into new instruments: saxophones, drums, magic wands/words. By trying to get to the sound within the words, the possible signified meanings become so dense that they explode into sound—the end of the world or the beginning of a world banging, umba-ing, dadadoo-doo-ing into our ears.

Much of the critical work on Stein seems driven by the sheer persistence of her language on the page. Thus Ulla Dydo, whose 2003 opus *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises* provides exhaustive research into the details of Stein's compositional practice via analysis of her written manuscripts, argues that "When Stein read a piece aloud . . . she read in an evenly paced, clear and neutral voice to allow the words to move freely in the auditory space of the text. For her, the voice of the work is not the personal, expressive voice of the author but the articulating voice of the composition."[8] For all its insight, Dydo's description fails to catch the electricity of the actual Stein voice. As Eric Sevareid has said of Stein: "In written form her words seem bizarre and difficult to follow, but when she herself reads them aloud it is all perfectly lucid, natural and exact."[9] Through language, Stein made language strange, but in this strangeness she paradoxically created a representational language that exemplified the basic truths of reality: that life was change, flux, repetition with variation.

By playing with the forgotten, misremembered, transformed, or newly imagined changes of consciousness, Stein practiced a writing process that foregrounds the meaning of sound: not the literal semantic meaning of words, but the meaning of sound making meaning. In this sense, Stein made radical attempts to break language away from its old poetic usage—or rather, as Marjorie Perloff states: "When . . . the poetry of indeterminacy, of anti-symbolism, has reached its outer limit, it comes back once more to such basic 'literary' elements as the hypnotic sound pattern, the chant, the narrative account, the conceptual scheme."[10] The "radical" nature of Stein's sound poetics, then, can be read as a return to some of the oldest techniques of structuring words into forms that go beyond "mere" practical communication of information. Stein's poetry is one version of the way in which modernist poetic practice "made it new"—and old—at the same time. Like her mentor William James describing his new version of philosophy "a new name for some old ways

of thinking," Stein's experimentation with the repetition and variation of words and word sounds was a new version of the old powers of language as sound.

The foregrounding of sound in conjunction with Stein's interest in cognitive processes influenced the aural and musical dimensions of her writing. Her investment in the work of William James, her interest in black culture and language via her own use of dialect and her collaborations with Virgil Thomson links Stein to various strands of improvisational practice.[11] This does not make her analogous to a jazz musician; it shows that her connection to improvisation was through a wider cultural matrix than jazz alone could contain: the new-old modes of thinking about thinking which William James brought to life in his pragmatist philosophy and his theories of cognition. Stein, however, was also an important figure in the complicated relationship between African-American cultural forms traditionally relegated to "low culture" and the inner-sanctums of High Modernism, one of which said sanctums was for many years her very own drawing room in Paris. In that room hung paintings by the chief visual primitivist of modernism, Picasso. In that same room, the young composers George Antheil and Virgil Thomson would meet Stein for the first time.[12] Thomson would later go on to collaborate with Stein on one of her—and his—most successful works, the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the original cast of which featured an all-African-American cast of singers and dancers.

Michael North has elucidated the relationship between Stein, Picasso, and Africa, demonstrating that their mutual aesthetic discoveries—cubism for Picasso and "the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature" by Stein's own account, for herself—were spurred on by their relationship to African art.[13] North details how Picasso's portrait of Stein was transformed by his experimentation with facial expressions derived from West African masks, and how Stein's use of black American dialect in her story *Melanctha* (written during the same period) analogously masked the original story's white characters.[14] Thus, argues North,

> Stein and Picasso take the first steps into cubism and literary modernism by performing uncannily similar transformations on the figure of Gertrude Stein herself. Placing a painted mask over his naturalistic portrait, Picasso duplicates the linguistic mask Stein was just devising for herself. By rewriting her own story for black characters, Stein anticipates, and perhaps even motivates, Picasso's use of African masks in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In each case, in painting and in literature, the step away from conventional verisimilitude into abstraction is accomplished by a figurative change of race.[15]

Such attempts at a "figurative change of race" were surely part of the fear implicit in T. S. Eliot's pronouncement about Stein's sax (and sex). Indeed, it is the complicated, convoluted world of saxophones and sexophones at the heart

of modernist primitivism that motivated some of Stein's most radical work. I'd like to turn now to the early influence of William James on Stein's poetics, and the implications this influence has for her improvisational, aural creations.

The Pragmatics of Improvisation

In 1893 Gertrude Stein enrolled as a "special student" in the Harvard Annex (soon to be named Radcliffe College). James and Stein by all accounts had a mutually encouraging relationship; James saw promise in Stein's intellect and Stein, along with her brother Leo, was fascinated with and inspired by James:

> Is life worth living? Yes, a thousand times yes when the world still holds such spirits as Prof. James. He is truly a man among men . . . a scientist of force and originality embodying all that is strongest and worthiest in the scientific spirit . . . a metaphysician skilled in abstract thought, clear and vigorous and yet too great to worship logic as his God, and narrow himself to a belief in the reason of man.[16]

This is how Stein described her favorite professor in an early essay she wrote at Radcliffe. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* Stein tells what might amount to an apocryphal story that nevertheless illuminates her relationship with James from her perspective. This description is particularly interesting when considering the connections between music, improvisation, and cognition in light of James:

> It was a very lovely spring day, Gertrude Stein had been going to the opera every night and going also to the opera in the afternoon and had been otherwise engrossed and it was the period of the final examinations, and there was the examination in William James' course. She sat down with the examination paper before her and she just could not. Dear Professor James, she wrote at the top of the her paper. I am so sorry but I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy to-day, and left.
>
> The next day she had a postal card from William James saying, Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly how you feel I often feel like that myself. And underneath it he gave her work the highest mark in his course.[17]

This is the fantasy of teacher and student as equals, and the fantasy of all students who wish that they had the right to be lazy. Furthermore, the assertion that "it was a lovely day," implies that to be outside, experiencing lived reality was preferable to the lock-box of an examination; the opera was art, which is life, but the "examination" was an examination of only the boring, artificial surface of things. Truly examining the world meant being in it, and Stein's statement "I am sorry but I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in

philosophy to-day" can be taken quite literally: Stein felt like a living woman, ready to hear songs, smell the Boston summer, investigate her own stream of thoughts.

This anecdote also points to Stein's characteristic bucking of authority—in this case, not James, but the institutional requirement of a test which would supposedly prove something about her intellect—as well as her interest in music. She had been neglecting her studies in order to go to the opera. So an early sign that Stein's talent lay not in the sciences, as James was advising her to pursue—or at least, the medical training required to subsequently study psychology at a graduate level—but rather as an artist, was a Stein journey into song. For a writer who would later collaborate on a successful American opera (for some commentators, still an oxymoron), it is significant that her early love of opera is expressed in connection with her affinity with James. Brad Bucknell notes that, while Stein's love of opera "seems to merely have been a phase . . . throughout her working life Stein would come back to opera, and her operas remain among her best known works."[18] Stein's operas, which I will turn to later, are where Stein's cognitive theories meet live performance, sonically embodying the strange, fluid maneuvering of our perception—where characters speak to each other in a language they seem to be inventing from moment to moment.

As Giles Gunn has noted, William James was interested in establishing a way to deal with life's provisionality on its own terms, in addition to making the flow of philosophy itself less rigid: "In short, by encouraging ideas to follow the irregular and unpredictable logics of dialogue rather than the more formal, systematic logics of disquisition and debate, James succeeded, as no other philosopher in the American tradition, in turning philosophy into a mode of answerable discourse."[19]

Thus, James not only made philosophy register ideas in new ways, he also wanted to break the formal dialogic structure of the debate and turn towards the dialogic structure of an actual conversation; the philosopher could no longer hide behind a thicket of syllogisms and abstractions. James, as Gunn points out, "produced a continuously ambulatory prose style that was rich in figurative maneuvers and surprises"—a philosopher walking and talking with his interlocutor in the world as it is lived.[20] Similarly, Stein's mature writing drew on an everyday vocabulary, but used that language to convey extremely complex and baffling propositions of philosophical discourse.

Stein and James part ways linguistically in that Stein's language does not try to *be* or even to *do* philosophy for the most part. Instead it tries to *be*. As Stein says of her time at Radcliffe:

> When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything . . . And so description is really unending . . . That is where philosophy comes in, it begins when one stops continuing describing everything.[21]

Even after she wrote her huge "description of everything," *The Making of Americans,* Stein's procedures remained more that of an improviser trying out variations on a theme and slowly accreting some kind of logic in the process. Or perhaps not: often the language just exists—it *is,* stripped of its semantic core, it is close to (without ever actually becoming), musical notes. Stein may have shortened her texts after completing her epic novel, but the techniques she experimented with in it remained part of her writing procedure. Janet Malcolm notes that, "by 1912 [Stein] had started producing work in a language of her own, one that uses English words but in no other way resembles English as it is known."[22] And so returning to a poem such as *If I Told Him*, we encounter the Stein language:

> If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him. Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it. If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.
>
> Now.
> Not now.
> And now.
> Now.[23]

As with much of Stein's work, we could decipher this first section of the poem based on a number of analytical modes, but we don't get much in the way of reference or allusion.[24] This is true of Stein's work in general, and little is gained in terms of our understanding—or *enjoyment*—of *If I Told Him* by knowing the history of Napoleon Bonaparte. The name "Napoleon" in these lines seems less a reference to Picasso's personality or appearance, or Stein's (we could imagine her portrait painted by Picasso to include a hand-in-the-jacket pose), or even the historical Napoleon, but all of those things at once transmitted into the sound of the name which is then divested of all of those meanings by virtue of repetition. "If Napoleon" becomes a convenient, rhythmically similar and rhyming phrase to pair with "If I told him." In her recitation of the poem, Stein makes both phrases into spondees, with stress on "If Nap-" and "If told." "Told him" forms an off-rhyme with "-poleon."

Hearing Stein read the text also confirms that the punctuation she uses (or leaves out) is not necessarily the key to the tonal structure of her sentences; for example, the last iteration of "would he like it if I told him" before the line beginning "Now" is spoken by Stein as a definite question, rather than a full stopped declarative as the written text indicates. Stein's texts move so quickly that it is hard to tell when or how to read such moments, especially when she leaves out punctuation: "Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it." The way in which Stein reads these lines indicates that we might potentially add commas, or perhaps an as-of-yet-uninvented punctuation mark indicating a very short pause, like so: "Would he like it, would

Napoleon, would Napoleon, would, would he like it." This does not indicate that Stein was unfamiliar with grammar. I believe it instead indicates an intentional freedom that Stein desires for the sound and rhythm of the words; like Whitman's long lines, the length of Stein's lines makes us pay attention to how we control our breath, our lips, and our tongue when we speak. The visual line moves along in collaboration with the written line, making us viscerally feel the way in which language is being connected and reconnected. Ulla Dydo asserts:

> [Stein's] language is the result of a process of reduction accomplished by punning with elements of sound and sight, which shakes up stable syntax and meaning. Unhampered by meaning or grammar, treating English as a foreign language, Stein puns shamelessly from the visual to the auditory and back.[25]

Punning is relational, dependent on associations based on sometimes arbitrary likeness (art-bit-airy Loch Ness). Stein's puns remind us again that words are sounds. In "If I Told Him" we *hear*:

> Has trains.
> Has trains.
> As trains.

And later:

> Father and farther.

And then the best pun in the poem:

> One.
> I land.
> Two.
> I land.
> Three.
> The land.
> Three.
> The land.
> Three.
> The land.
> Two.
> I land.
> Two.
> I land.
> One.
> I land.
> Two.
> I land.[26]

Stretched out like this on the page, and then heard as Stein rips through it aurally, we are in a new soundworld. The poem about visuality—a *portrait of a painter*—has become a vehicle for exploring the weird inconsistencies between the written, visual aspect of words (island) and what they imply when spoken: "I land." Is there a weird mathematical formula here? One I land + two I lands=The land? What does this have to do with Picasso? Would knowing about a hypothetical painting he made of an island help us "understand" this poem? Is it even "about" Picasso anymore? Perhaps it is "about" painting, but now the visual dimensions of painting have succumbed to the tone color: in German, *die Klangfarben*. Dydo reminds us that Stein treats English like a foreign language; her first languages were French and German, that rambling language of philosophy where meaning is deferred until the end of the sentence—the verb hanging out at the end, defining the action like a dog's tail wagging.[27]

Stein often paired this playful use of the aural dimensions of language with a repetition bordering on the obsessive. But in this repetition we see careful variations. It is not merely the babbling of a brook (or a baby), or sound and fury signifying nothing: it is language signifying how language fits into reality. William Gass points to the Jamesian implications of Stein's repetition:

> Almost at once she realized that language itself is a complete analogue of experience because it, too, is made of a large but finite number of relatively fixed terms which are then allowed to occur in a limited number of clearly specified relations, so that it is not the appearance of a word that matters but *the manner of its reappearance*."[28]

I would add that it is not only the re*appearance* that counts but the "re-sounding" of the words as well. Just as Theodor Adorno's critique of jazz failed to fully address the methods by which musical repetition creates a potentially liberatory space for listeners, dancers, and musicians, Stein's critics who view her work as infantile are missing the point of what infants do with repetition, questioning, trial and error: they are learning how to live, and manifesting on a micro-level what all life feels like at a macro-level.

Greg Downey, anthropologist and practitioner of the Brazilian martial art *capoeira,* has detailed the value of repetition in learning at a physical level; he cites the latest research in neuroscience to indicate that repetition isn't what we think it is.

"Because conditions change," writes Downey, "accomplishing what appears to be a similar movement requires constant self-monitoring and ongoing readjustment rather than flawless repetition."[29] I would argue that Stein's use of linguistic repetition is both an example *of* this process—Stein herself working out the labyrinths of cognition—and a metaphorical representation of the process which the reader then enters into. In this way I differ slightly from Porter Abbott's assertion that "it is not clear at all what such texts [like Stein's] do for us in this regard. These are perverse texts; they yield a kind of experiential

knowledge that is rarely, if ever, available outside the reader or viewer's transaction with them."[30] Stein's repetitions are, indeed, very representational, but not in the sense of making a picture or object that we can see. Rather, her representations are representations of the *process* of (often subconscious) problem-solving that language and thought-via-language allow us to engage in. Abbott in fact makes a similar claim in the following nuanced assessment of modernist literature and its evolutionary value:

> [difficult modernist texts] replace an art of representation with an art of cognitive states that are inaccessible or understandably avoided in the ordinary course of life. As such, they would seem to serve no apparent evolutionary purpose, indeed may interfere with evolutionary success, yet they generate real knowledge of who we are. "Wisdom" may be a better term than knowledge, since what is often involved is knowing what it feels like not to know.[31]

Stein's writing then gives us this wisdom, and illustrates on an artistic level the "Four Characters in Consciousness" from James's seminal 1890 essay, "The Stream of Consciousness." James writes that:

> (1) Every 'state' [of consciousness] tends to be part of a personal consciousness.
> (2) Within each personal consciousness states are always changing.
> (3) Each personal consciousness is sensibly continuous.
> (4) It is interested in some parts of its object to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—chooses from among them, in a word—all the while.[32]

In Stein's work, we see the motion of a personal consciousness mapped out in varying, changing directions, continuously (especially when there is little or no punctuation between her sentences), interconnected phrases, and, as Ulla Dydo has noted, we get a "stripped down" version of language, exemplifying the gaps in cognitive selection and the associative logic which those gaps produce.[33] The repetition in Stein's language again gives the lie to our usual connotations of repetition—that it repeats the same every time. Rather, her variations, no matter how slowly or subtly they come, demonstrate James's point that "*there is no proof that an incoming current ever gives us just the same bodily sensation twice*."[34] James asserts that the differences in experience, no matter how seemingly repetitious, also imply that "our state of mind is never precisely the same."[35] Ideas inside our head change and are changed by the world; consciousness is, like experience generally, "not . . . chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described."[36]

Marjorie Perloff notes that in reading Stein, " . . . the important thing is not to establish a fixed meaning for any one item . . . but to see how carefully Gertrude Stein has structured the whole sequence."[37] Like music, however, Stein's words give the impression that we are moving in time, that no matter

how much the reader stares at them and rereads them printed on the page, they will be slightly different iterations of a wordy island in the stream each time, like the word games at the end of "If I Told Him":

> Two.
> I land.
> As a so.
> They cannot.
> A note.
> They cannot.
> A float.
> They cannot.
> They dote.
> They cannot.
> They as denote.
> Miracles play.[38]

We are kept afloat by the notes, denotations, connotations, "cannotions," or "cannot-oceans," or "can-o'-tations." What are Stein's "miracles"? Maybe that the words go on, caught in a stream of reference, deference, preference and play. Playing the words, playing the mind, Stein gives James's theories a life on the page and in the mind's ear, the feeling of being *in* language, via sight and sound.

Ann Douglas notes that "James and Stein seem to be running on shared insights, improvising a collaboration."[39] Ironically, James never finished the first of Stein's published major works, *Three Lives*—like the schoolgirl Stein, perhaps he just didn't feel like reading all day. "You know how hard it is for me to read novels," he related to Stein in a letter, "Well I read 30 or 40 pages, and said 'this is a fine new kind of realism—Gertrude Stein is great! I will go at it carefully when just the right mood comes.' "[40] He had visited the post-Radcliffe Stein in 1908; two years later he was dead. During that visit to Stein and Alice Toklas's Paris apartment, James confirmed that "I always told you that you should keep your mind open" as he gazed with amazement on Stein's art collection.[41] Stein's mind had indeed been opened by the guidance of her favorite teacher, and her artistic sensibilities were opening to new repetitions of the stream of life.

Melanctha and the Limits of Language

Before turning to two of Stein's most important works, one which I think demonstrates her improvisational style—*Tender Buttons*—and the other which is directly musical—the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*—I want to briefly note the significance of what Stein herself considered to be a formative work in her career: the story entitled *Melanctha: Each One as She May.* In this

story, we see the development of Stein's prose style via the formal and aesthetic device of an African-American protagonist, and what Stein heard as a "black voice."

Stein wrote the story that would become *Melanctha* in 1905 and 1906. Michael North notes that this period was especially crucial because it was also the time when Picasso was completing his portrait of Stein, itself so influenced by black—in this case, West African—art.[42] Stein's story was in some sense, like much of her work, a repetition with an important variation. As North describes:

> Having struggled unsuccessfully to account for an unhappy love affair in *Q.E.D.*, a book that remained unpublished until after her death, Stein rewrote the story, sometimes leaving whole lines of dialogue nearly intact, as "Melanctha," the story of a young black woman's emotional trials.[43]

Stein's story, with its repetition of a failed lesbian and a failed heterosexual romance, paired with layers of repeating, spiraling sentences where the two main characters—Melanctha Herbert and Jefferson Campbell—represent a Steinian "signifyin(g)," again demonstrates Aldon Nielsen's point that "American English, like American music, beats with a black heart."[44] Yet there is not much of what we would call "dialect" in Melanctha at all; it is more a Stein translation of what she thought dialect would sound like, just as her "portraits" of people are not word pictures of them but strange translations and transformations from within the Stein mind.

A typical passage from the story combines Steinian repetition with dialogue, exemplifying Stein's continuing exploration of the ways in which language acts as a medium for cognition. We learn that Melanctha and Jeff "could work out together what they meant by what they were always saying to each other."[45] Here, they discuss their ongoing ambiguous love affair in a conversation as complicated as their emotional states:

> "Well Melanctha, I certainly know I am right proud too in me, but I certainly never could act so to you Melanctha, if I ever knew any way at all you ever really loved me. No Melanctha darling, you and me certainly don't feel much the same way ever. Any way Melanctha, I certainly do love you true Melanctha." "And I love you too Jeff, even though you don't never certainly seem to believe me." "No I certainly don't any way believe you Melanctha, even when you say it to me. I don't know Melanctha how, but sure I certainly do trust you, only I don't believe now ever in your really being loving to me. I certainly do know you trust me always Melanctha, only somehow it ain't ever all right to me. I certainly don't know any way otherwise Melanctha, how I can say it to you." "Well I certainly can't help you no ways any more Jeff Campbell, though you certainly say it right when you say I trust you Jeff now always. You certainly is the best man Jeff Campbell, I ever can know, to me. I never been anyways thinking it can be ever different to me."[46]

While this passage does retain some of the traces of stereotypical black dialect so ubiquitous in white depictions of black speech—"right proud," "you certainly *is* the best man," etc.—in the wider context of the story itself this speech merely sounds like another Steinian word game, mapping the complex negotiations of human relationships onto these particular characters. The constant repetition of names and the word "love" creates a sense that each of these terms is being defined and redefined at every iteration, so that every conversation begins anew the relationship between *our* understanding of the characters' psyches and of their *own understanding of each other*. Marjorie Perloff notes that, "like Jeff Campbell, we are made to feel that the truth is just about to be disclosed only to learn—in the course of "beginning again and again"—that such "truth" can never be accessible."[47] The story does have a plot, but by the time Melanctha and Jeff fall apart and Melanctha dies at the end of the narrative, we still don't really know much about what motivates Melanctha, and neither does she (or Jeff).

If the main characters are supposedly speaking in a "Negro voice," we might ask whether or not the passages of straight narration are cast in a different, "non-dialect" voice. Here is a representative example:

> Jeff learned every day now, more and more, how much it was that he could really suffer. Sometimes it hurt so in him, when he was alone, it would force some slow tears from him. But every day, now that Jeff Campbell, knew more how it could hurt him, he lost his feeling of deep awe that he once always had had for Melanctha's feeling. Suffering was not so much after all, thought Jeff Campbell, if even he could feel it had hurt Melanctha, and yet he too could have it and not make any kind of a loud holler with it.[48]

Is this free indirect speech? Does the "loud holler" echo in Stein's narratorial voice or in Jeff's mind, or both? Again, Jeff and Melanctha's names are repeated such that we get a new definition of the person each time we hear their name, as if the narrator is persistently trying to tell us, "look, here is *this* person, remember him? I just mentioned him doing this. Now he is doing that." The general effect of *Melanctha* is like that of the other stories in *Three Lives*: Stein has condensed the longer techniques of psychological investigation that she explored in *The Making of Americans* into a literally shorter but almost equally mystifying and cyclical form.

Melanctha thus begs the question: what is so "black" about the story, other than the narrator's insistence that the characters are black people living in a Central Atlantic Coastal city called Bridgepoint? Does the repeated reference of Melanctha being "blue" make it a blues story? Stein sometimes uses stereotypical descriptions of supposed black innocence—as in "the earth-born, boundless joy of the negroes"—to frame her characters' action.[49] But to a modern reader these depictions ring flat, as does her light sprinkling of the term nigger, as in "to have a good warm nigger time."[50] These moments of overt racial stereotyping actually point to the underlying tension in Melanctha's life.

As her friend Rose says of her, "she never was no just common kind of nigger."[51] Melanctha is Stein's version of the tragic mulatta, doomed by her mixed-race blood. Unable to exist with the "earth-born negroes" nor the white folks who raised her, Melanctha is literally and figuratively a shade; a light-skinned woman seen as black, a ghost flickering between black and white society. Here we find perhaps the "real" Steinian thrust of the narrative: like many voices and characters in Stein's work, Melanctha is a mask. She is a mask of Stein in blackface, a mask of a lesbian in a straight woman's body, a mask of a philosophical discourse on love in the mouth of fictional character, a mask of the daily trivialities of life that hide the underlying sense of disorder and incoherence.

Was it this then, the deeper psychological dimension of the story, that made Richard Wright praise *Melanctha* as "the first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States"?[52] Was he drawn to Stein's implied sympathy with black life? M. Lynn Weiss states that, "Unlike T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, Stein appropriated a black voice as much from an identification with the blues of black folk, particularly as a Jew and as a lesbian, as from its function as a distancing strategy."[53] And yet Wright specifically praised the *aural* qualities of the story:

> The style was so insistent and original and sang so quaintly that I took the book home. As I read it my ears were opened for the first time to the magic of the spoken word. I began to hear the speech of my grandmother, who spoke a deep, pure Negro dialect and with whom I had lived for many years. All of my life I had been only half hearing, but Miss Stein's struggling words made the speech of the people around me vivid. From that moment on, in my attempts at writing, I was able to tap at will the vast pool of living words that swirled around me.[54]

Aldon Nielsen questions whether or not "Stein's reinscription of white imaginings of black speech, her orthographic display of racial difference, simply fall[s] back upon itself, 'othering' itself while at the same time further immuring black speaking subjectivities in the tar baby of white discourse." [55] Yet Nielsen also notes that later black authors have been drawn to Stein, even if they have to "[revise] her past to make her more useful to their present."[56] I believe that if we take Wright's sentiment seriously, we can find three important keys to understanding Stein's work: 1) Stein's mastery of the mystery of language is something that a writer, like Wright, would find immediately attractive, even if the language had not been cast in a "black" setting. 2) Stein's depiction of the psychological states of humans, as guided by her studies with James and her later research at Johns Hopkins in medicine, captures the indeterminacy of *life* in what Marjorie Perloff has called the "indeterminacy" of her *poetics*. 3) By seizing on black speech, Stein *was* consciously connecting her already extant interest in the *sound* of language to a contemporaneous, if confused and sometimes racist, interest in the intellectual and aesthetic potential of black people, people like Wright, whom she would actually meet

in 1945—reminding us that the connections between black and white, among other ethnic and racial relationships, was always ongoing, complicated, and never consisting of simple, one-sided exchanges (i.e.—black artists being influenced by their white masters or white artists blacking up). Thus, one of Wright's characters in his posthumously published first novel, *Lawd Today!* would describe Stein's famous phrase "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" (from her poem *Sacred Emily*) as an example of jazz scatting.[57]

Stein's "black voice" is an analogue for the "jazz rhythms" which Ralph Ellison claimed to hear in the *Waste Land*.[58] The confluence of these white, supposedly non-jazz poets with their younger black protégés in the language of jazz and aural story-telling is a sign of the underlying power and modernist sophistication of improvisation itself. Eliot and Stein were expatriates, but they were deeply American in their ambivalent but productive relationship to African-American culture. "As an American," Stein recounts in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* she "likes primitive things to be more savage."[59] Stein is justifying the claim that she wasn't much influenced by African sculpture, and paradoxically implies with her "more savage primitivism" that the *modern* African Americans were a more attractive focus for modernist innovation. Michael North details how this denial of the influence of African art is to be approached cautiously, but nevertheless there is something notable in Stein's call for an *American* blackness.

For Stein, the "Negro Vogue" was set squarely in the United States of her youth. In her preference for primitive African Americans over primitive Africans, she ironically points toward the art that those "savage" African Americans were making in her own, *American* English, starting long before her admirer Wright began his career. This veiled recognition of the actual modernity of the primitive holds within it a recognition of the inescapable genesis of twentieth-century American aesthetics, which would follow Stein to Paris as jazz spread across the globe during the 'teens. Words and music crossed and recrossed the color line; Stein's attraction to the voices of her fellow Americans was a manifestation of the power inherent in the signifyin(g) practices of the linguistic and musical life of improvisation in America. In Stein's depiction of black life via her own version of black speech, "white" modernism again demonstrates its debt towards, and contradictory connections to, the innovations of the tradition that Paul Gilroy has described as a "counter-culture of modernity."[60]

I'll now move to a work that demonstrates another version of Stein's sound effects; the 1914 poem *Tender Buttons*. Like *Melanctha*, the poem develops her interest in sound, while working towards a unique Steinian voice.

Eighty-Eight Tender Buttons: The Sound of Stein's Objects

In his essay exploring the linguistic conundrums in the work of Gertrude Stein and other modernists, Porter Abbott states that "It has often been observed

that if you repeat a word often enough it loses its meaning and becomes a moment of pure sound. [Samuel] Beckett loves to test the limits of this effect, but, uniquely, he does so without relieving readers of their syntactical obligations."[61] This statement concerning Beckett is also a fitting description of much of Stein's work, including moments in *Tender Buttons*, which Abbott notes as being

> a strange text. Well beyond paraphrase, it can only be known by entering into it. And once in it, you know it, whether you want to or not. This may be what Stein meant in "Composition as Explanation," when she wrote paradoxically of "everybody in their entering the modern composition" that "they do enter it, if they do not enter it they are not so to speak in it they are out of it and so they do enter it."[62]

Here, the work is architectural, tactile—a space to be entered and a series of objects, food, and rooms (the titles of the three main sections of *Tender Buttons)* to experience viscerally. And while the piece does not engage in the extremes of repetition and variation that occur in a poem like *If I Told Him* or in Stein's longer prose works like *The Making of Americans,* I believe that hearing the work literally as a "piece of sound"—a sound composition—can significantly contribute to our critical awareness of the text. We can also read this sound piece in relation to its function as a thought piece, less a map of observations—images or pictures absorbed by the eye—than a record of how those observations influence and are influenced by the observer. *Tender Buttons* is a record of the sounding of language and the sounding of thought, via the actual sound of language. Like Thoreau sounding Walden Pond to find out how deep it is—in turn a measurement of his thoughts—Stein sounds her quotidian surroundings to sound her perception.

Tender Buttons is a text published in 1914, two years after Stein finished writing it. Carl Van Vechten noted that upon publication it was "widely quoted and ridiculed by friends and enemies in the American press."[63] The work suggests a practice that Stein would continue throughout her career: transcribing her observations or imaginative transformations of those observations *as they occur*. Here, Stein practices an improvisational procedure following what Philip Pastras has called the "discipline" of improvisation; Ulla Dydo has carefully studied how Stein makes this effect *felt* when it is not directly spontaneous, in either case, the effect on the *reader* is that of a spontaneous and provisional text.[64]

This effect is most remarkably seen in the line from her long poem of the 1930s, which implies careful observation in its title, *Stanzas in Meditation*: "In looking up I have managed to see four things."[65] Seated alone in a room, the author looks upon something and writes about it. We can imagine this procedure as the source of the initial "objects," "food," and "rooms" of *Tender Buttons*; even though these "actual" things are radically altered through language, they are nevertheless based on real things—and, for that matter, Stein's reworking of them in words are also real things, new objects in her and our

field of perception. Hence the words, seeming to be images, turn out to be stranger than normal sight will allow. One result of such confusion is that it forces the reader into the realm of sound. And at the risk of being too specific and falling into the trap of referentiality that the poem resists, I'd like to riff on the title of the poem as being suggestive of the sounds of piano keys—the "tender buttons" of sound making a series of odd, distinct notes from words.

Like most women of her generation in America, Stein probably knew how to play rudimentary piano. A basic facility on the instrument was required for parlor entertainment and proper cultivation of taste. She once mused that "I like to improvise on a piano I like to play sonatinas followed by another always on the white keys I do not like black keys and never two notes struck by the same hand at the same time because I do not like chords."[66] But Stein the opera lover was not a musical performer; it was Stein's "wife" who played the role of the musically gifted spouse. Alice Toklas had in fact given up an early dream of becoming a concert pianist. [67] Stein was apparently uninterested in actually becoming a musician as a teenager, even as she cultivated an early appreciation of music and visual art.[68] So when Stein notes that she "improvises" on the white keys, we might imagine her meandering around the piano keyboard, stopping to obsessively repeat some pattern that pleases her ear but might not fit into any formal conception of musical logic.

Stein's attention to sound was grounded in an appreciation of music, but she was not very interested in being a musician or performing music per se. Yet by being so attuned to the sounds of words, her work is based in aurality to the same or even greater extent of that of more directly "musical" modernists. This fact is emphasized in *Tender Buttons* by the resistance to clear images of the "objects," "food," and "rooms" the piece purports to describe. Even a cubist painting is a picture of something(s). Stein's text is more like a representation of the refusal to represent; or a revision of representation via language that makes new non-sense. Lacking a clear sense of what we are supposed to "see" in the various tableaux of the piece, we are left with various ways of experiencing the text. Because we are used to using words to connote things, however, it is almost impossible not to see while we are hearing and thinking; but forget about a Platonic idea of a carafe, a chair, or for that matter, a piano:

> ***A Piano.***
>
> If the speed is open, if the color is careless, if the event is overtaken, if the selection of a strong scent is not awkward, if the button holder is held by all the waving color and there is no color, not any color. If there is no dirt in a pin and there can be none scarcely, if there is not then the place is the same as up standing.
>
> This is no dark custom and it even is not acted in any such a way that a restraint is not spread. That is spread, it shuts and it lifts awkwardly not awkwardly the center is in standing.[69]

Is the "button holder" a weird figure for the piano? The buttons would be the piano keys, made tender and sensitive by the analogously tender fingers of

a player's hands. It is an attractive option for interpretation, until we try to parse the meaning of the sentences in relation to the piano-button-holder. Porter Abbott has noted Stein's use of "garden path" sentences—sentences which are correct grammatically but which semantically lead us down multiple dead ends, as in Stein's sentence "Any little thing is a change that is if nothing is wasted in that cellar"—and how these sentences foreground the nonrepresentational nature of Stein's language.[70] But the first sentence of "A piano." isn't even, properly speaking, a sentence—garden-path-variety or otherwise. The "if" proposition is never completed by a "then" conclusion. Furthermore, we don't really know what "the speed" or "the color" or "the event" refer to, especially since we are not accustomed to thinking of speed as being open or closed, or of colors being careless or safe. Perhaps this is what Stein was getting at when she noted: "And so in TENDER BUTTONS and then on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns. I knew that nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something."[71] By stripping her poem of nouns, as Stein perversely claimed to be doing in this poem filled with sections that in any other universe would be called nouns, we are left with words as something else: perhaps actions—verbs? Each description in the poem is a charting of time, a rendering of a strange survey of a surreal curiosity cabinet.

Tender Buttons emphasizes the fact that words have arbitrary meanings. But I have highlighted "A piano." because it reminds us that Stein's words are also like musical notes. These words, even her entire sentences and paragraphs, seem to be unhoused from semantic meaning. Stein has transferred the "meaning" of poems like *Tender Buttons* to the action. The nouns have been negated; this is not a tender button even though I am showing you a tender button. Just because the poem uses a noun and a definite article ("a piano")—the subsequent words do not necessarily describe the piano, any piano—or at least not in any way we might think of. Rather, the words force us to question our very concept of "pianoness" altogether. William James, in an inadvertent foreshadowing of Stein's piano, states in "The Stream of Consciousness":

> Does not the same piano-key, struck with the same force, make us hear in the same way? . . . It seems a piece of metaphysical sophistry to suggest that we do not, and yet a close attention to the matter shows that *there is no proof that an incoming current ever gives us just the same bodily sensation twice.*
>
> *What is got twice is the same OBJECT.*[72]

By showing us a piano, which is not a piano, Stein, has made us see and hear the piano in a completely new way. The meaningless sounds of a doodling on a piano have become analogous to the scratching of the observer's pen across the page. Both actions chart being in time, both are meaningless but nevertheless enact a meaning via their attempt to place structure upon meaninglessness. Here we are far away from the percussive primitivism of Antheil and Pound, or the blues of Hughes, yet nevertheless in the realms of improvisatory thought.

In a subsection entitled "Roastbeef," Stein presents an interesting Zen-like paradox: "There is no volume in sound."[73] If we can't hear sound—if it, in other words, is of an inaudible volume—does it count as sound? This is a paradox until we think of it geometrically: sound has no volume, it does not contain space to fill like a glass or a hat or a bathtub does. Instead, sound *fills up space*, and hence in another paradox, it *is* volume. Sound is the waves filling the spaces in objects, in rooms, in food, in poems. As Walter Ong notes of the importance of sound in human consciousness (particularly in oral cultures): "Sounds all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces them. A violin filled with concrete will not sound like a normal violin. A saxophone sounds differently from a flute: it is structured differently inside. And above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances."[74] Alice Toklas described Stein's voice as "unlike anyone else's voice—deep, full, velvety like a great contralto's, like two voices."[75] The voice in *Tender Buttons* resonates with an audible, unique volume of sound.

Sound fills up *Tender Buttons* as the poem progresses; the sections get longer and longer, the white space of the pages fill up with more black words. By the poem's last sentence we learn that "The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain."[76] I read this as a series of sounds: "justice" is an off-rhyme with "likeness" and "asparagus." "Care," "there" set up a rhyme with "as-PAR-agus." The point is not that all of this is meaningless—but rather that the meaning is in the making, the doing, the verbalizing. Maybe today "fountain" means "asparagus" and vice versa. Words become sounds again, and language has infinite possibilities for world-making. The seemingly arbitrary connections—often carried out via rhyme as in the above examples—between the words and phrases in the poem make the entire piece seem spontaneous, improvisational, the stream of a strange consciousness mapping the life of the mind, as it interacts with and is influenced by reality. As Daniel Albright suggests, "Stein's textures are also musical through avoidance (or misplacement) of nouns. Nounless strings of words tend to move quickly."[77] In *Tender Buttons,* Stein's "absence of nouns" is a catalog of action, words *becoming*, words sounding off of each other and their old connotations, breaking into new being and meaning.

When the Saints Go Marching In

In conclusion I will now turn briefly to the sole work of music on which Stein collaborated and that was performed while she was alive, the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Composer Virgil Thomson also collaborated with Stein on a second opera, *The Mother of Us All*, which premiered the year after Stein's death, and he had earlier set several of her short poems to music. Thomson, as these works demonstrate, was perhaps Stein's greatest listener,

and his settings of Stein's texts remind us again that hearing Stein's language is crucial to her entire poetic project. Thomson said of Stein's language that:

> Gertrude was wonderful to set to music because there was no temptation to illustrate the words . . . For the most part you didn't know what it meant anyway, so you couldn't make it like birdie babbling by a brook or heavy heavy hangs my heart. My theory being, and I still hold it to be true, you had to set it for the way the grammar went and for the clarity of the words. If you make the words clear for pronunciation, then the meaning will take care of itself.[78]

To more precisely articulate this naturally musical language in *Four Saints*, Thomson sought out black actors and singers for the premiere of the opera. In this iteration of modernist primitivization, we see a return of *Stein's* initial desire for an avant-garde language located in black speech, and the underlying connections between that speech and a whole range of improvisational aesthetics. Stein's approval of the casting decision reminds us of her initial fascination with blackness, which supposedly brought twentieth-century fiction into being through *Melanctha*. It is also significant that Carl Van Vechten, the most famous white modernist advocate of black art, was one of Stein's biggest supporters in the U.S. Van Vechten nevertheless considered Thomson's idea for an all-black cast as strange, given that the opera's characters and settings were apparently European.[79] He would be a crucial connection, however, in organizing the opera's American production.[80]

It was not Stein's decision to cast the black singers, but it fit into an already established relationship between Stein and blackness. Having "created modernism" with a black voice, Stein's first and only success in the music world relied in part on the novelty of the black voices in her opera. But the success also depended on those actual voices, which were sung by actual black cast members and which again proved that despite the racist regime that many white modernists brought to their work, there were actual African Americans responsible for modernism's innovations. In the case of the opera, Thomson used members of director Eva Jessye's Harlem choir, who noted that "With this opera we had to step on fresh ground, something foreign to our nature completely. Not like *Porgy and Bess* that came the next year—that was our inheritance, our own lives. But what did we know about the minds of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson? We really went abroad on that."[81]

Ironically, however, we might reason that Thomson and Stein were desperately trying to get into the minds of their African-American peers. The opera's original incarnation, with its black performers singing music that most white audiences didn't think they would or should be able to sing, foregrounded the contradictions of the very primitivism that drove Stein, Thomson, and other white modernists. Here was a black cast singing:

> To know to know to love her so.
> Four saints prepare for saints.
> It makes it well fish.

> Four saints prepare for saints it makes it well well fish it makes it well fish prepare for saints.
> In narrative prepare for saints.
> Prepare for saints.
> Two saints.
> Four saints.
> Two saints prepare for saints it two saints prepare for saints in prepare for saints.
> A narrative of prepare for saints in narrative prepare for saints.
> Remain to narrate to prepare two saints for saints.[82]

These opening lines from the opera, sung over Thomson's lush, playful waltz score, force us to question the essentialized ways of thinking about music and language across the board. Is this "black" language? Is it white language? This is language seemingly disconnected from any known culture. Stein's operas are a place for her linguistic inventions to flourish in real time, dramatically. The characters seem to be making up a story and a language to tell that story as they go along. Her opera reflects, then, that connection which the youthful Stein felt between life and the life-in-art as she ditched William James's examination in favor of a day at the opera. Brad Bucknell asserts that

> one could say that perhaps *Four Saints*, like much of Stein's work, is an attempt . . . to come to terms with chance. Stein's sense of landscape is a version of the finite world of things struck through with the indefiniteness of linguistic permutations, and it is precisely the sense of indeterminacy which makes for a connection between language and perceptual experience outside of literary or epistemological convention.[83]

Like other Stein texts, the sound and the literal meaning of the words in *Four Saints* stand in uneasy tension. The "narrative of preparing for saints" has begun, but we're not sure who the saints are (later we find out they are a collection of anachronistically positioned saints—Teresa, Ignatius, etc.), what they or we are preparing for, what the narration means or is "about." What does "it" refer to in the third line? Is the first "it" a different "it" than the second "it," and if so, what does it mean that the one "it" makes the other "it" "well fish"? Would it make "sense" punned another way: "shell fish," "selfish," "welpish" . . . ? Again, we are in Stein land, a land where the sound of words rules and where our sense of sense is incensed. By the end of the opera, the characters still seem to be contemplating—as do the listeners—what the opera is doing, what it is about, and how it should proceed. As St. Teresa #1 (there are two St. Teresas who sometimes sing together, sometimes separately) sums it up in the last act: "Begin to trace begin to race to place begin and in in that that is why this is what is left as may may follows June and June follows moon and moon follows soon and it is very nearly ended with bread."[84]

At the ending, the opera is still beginning to "trace" and "race" its own progress; the characters are caught up in the arbitrary rhymes of the English language, "June," "moon," "soon." The Saints are luxuriously lost in language,

expressing what Thomson called, in his description of the opera's theme, "the terrible disciplines of truth and spontaneity, of channeling their skills without loss of inspiration."[85] The opera thus has the effect of being in the moment, spurred on by the rhythms of thought and music, never ceasing until, well, the end, which might as well be the beginning: we are still in life, which is still changing, repeating with variations. As Bucknell states:

> *Four Saints* is a text very much at the interstices of music, writing, and theatre, and as such it may also call for a shift in critical practice as well. The opera achieves a kind of plurality which escapes ordinary interpretive analysis. For the text unthinks us, returns language to spectacle, to the sacral and social, though not to the religious, to the Father.[86]

Like *Tender Buttons*, like the movements of thought in *Melanctha,* and like much else in Stein's work, we are caught up again in the process of language becoming: sound becoming word becoming sound.

Yet knowledge of the circumstances behind the opera's production, and the intersections between Stein, Thomson, and black culture, tends to remind us of that no matter how strange the language is, the opera retains a connection to the specific modernist environment from which it sprang. All recorded versions of the opera retain a black cast, but hearing the opera does not fully capture the historical specificity and novelty of the original production, which not only exposed more of the general public than ever before to Stein's language, but also placed it in the mouths of black singers. It is as if the white audiences, with their mixed disdain and desire for the comic primitivism of black speech, were faced with the revelation that speech itself is strange. Ironic, too, was the fact that Thomson's tonal score for the opera was not the typical avant-garde music associated with modernist Western Art music. In this way, it is actually analogous to jazz in that as often as jazz was considered raucous, riotous, and dissonant, for some it was considered *too* tame, too repetitive, too tonal. Adorno is the most famous voice in music criticism advocating this view, and Thomson himself was known to have an ambivalent relationship to jazz's supposed radical nature—yet as Glenn Watkins notes:

> Thomson buttressed Stein's method and language through a collection of familiar components whose matter-of-factness was matched by the irrationality of unforeseen juxtaposition. He may also have taken satisfaction in noting the compatibility of such an approach with the improvisatory techniques that stood at the heart of jazz as well as Dada.[87]

And, we might add, the improvisatory techniques that stood at the heart of the religious music and speech which Thomson turned to for the musical materials of his opera, the familiar folksy, hymn-tune tonality supporting Stein's weird text (at one point towards the end of the Prologue, Thomson includes a musical quotation of the opening bars of "My Country 'Tis of Thee").

Like T. S. Eliot, Mark Twain, and Miles Davis, Virgil Thomson hailed from Missouri. Thomson's blackfacing—or black-voicing—in *Four Saints* implicitly reconnects his Parisian modernism to the American cultural forms that provided much of transatlantic modernism's creative energy. Here is Thomson, writing about a black revival tent meeting that he witnessed in Kansas City in the 1920s:

> I learned more about the rhythm of the English language in a half-hour than I had ever known before. Also African scales. You see the sermon was intoned. And fitted into a regular rhythmic scheme. Basic rhythm (clapping, swatting Bible, jumping) very simple. Complex syncopated rhythms to fill in the spaces. These determined by language, but sufficiently exaggerated that they are recognizable as interesting apart from the language. The extraordinary thing to me, however, was their aptness to the language.[88]

Whose language is "the language" here? Is it black speech or white speech? Is it the way in which black voices express the common American English language? Thomson's aesthetic preference rings close to that of Stein's earlier attraction to black American speech, and implies that this speech *is* American speech. The deep blues—in philosophical terms—of the spirituals (DuBois called them the "Sorrow Songs") provide the spirit of much American religious music, forging a bond between white and black freedom songs. While the earthly circumstances of a black and white congregation might arise from different histories (as the recent "Reverend Wright-gate" incident reminds us), the musical expression in American Christian tradition is one of the defining links between a broad swath of Protestant sects: the story of one of the most famous religious songs, "Amazing Grace," serves as an emblematic version of this shared history of suffering and redemption. And it was the spirituals and other music of the church that provided a central strand of philosophical and musical expression that fed into the stream of twentieth-century blues and jazz. As an old musical adage goes, American music is a mix of Saturday night and Sunday morning. In this sense, we might ask whether the casting of African Americans in *Four Saints* is an underhanded acknowledgment of the centrality of black voices, metaphorically and figuratively, in American modernism and subsequent aesthetic developments.

Brad Bucknell disputes the idea that there are "Gospel" quotations or allusions in the opera's text or music, asserting that, "Indeed, the music by both Western avant-garde *and* African-American standards of the time is extremely 'straight' "[89] Yet he also locates the underlying presence of blackness in the opera—in its premiere and in subsequent performances which bear the weight of that original performance—as a "return of the repressed" black voice:

> this repressed "blackness" actually forms the historical shadow, a silent shadow in the midst of all the music and words, which even now, many years after the first performance, insinuates itself into the opera as the known historical horizon of its possibility.[90]

Here again, then, as in *Melanctha,* an analysis of Stein's work is incomplete if it is disconnected from the African-American cultural forms which supported it and which she engaged with on multiple, contradictory levels of admiration and primitivization. Stein's use of the black voice—and the connection between that voice and American musical expression which made its way into her opera—was a primitivist counterpoint to her improvisational tendencies gleaned from James.

Epilogue: Stein on the Mic

Recently I encountered a new version of the Stein voice, suspended over the processes of modern cut n' mix recording technology. It is the same version of *If I Told Him* recorded by Stein in New York in the mid-1930s; that is, the same recording of Stein's voice, but now paired with music courtesy of electronic beat tricksters DJ Wally and DJ Spooky.[91] And it all makes (non)sense; the looping, loping beats pulled from the dregs of the last 30 years of funky grooves, distilled from Afrodiasporic crossings and recontextualizations of various music—all of this underlying Stein's voice. It is just as illogically logical as the Virgil Thomson settings, and just as glorious.

Stein lives! Stein raps! Would she laugh at the pun of her name in the nom-de-rhythm of the early white New York hip hop DJ, Steinski? The avant-garde was already old when Louis Armstrong "invented" scat singing; the avant-garde was already old when Gertrude Stein heard something attractive in the speech and the souls of black folk. But it's always new, too. I hope I have shown that it is no coincidence that such a voice would be so clear even on the printed page. Stein's words are verbs, movements, processes, thoughts; they are sounds: ineffable, they remind us of the strange mystery and power of language even as they disappear into another repetition. Like Ezra Pound, Stein had a stubborn attachment to types and essentialisms, yet a wide capacity for experimentation and openness that belied her underlying conservative nature. As poetry, her work foreshadows later developments in linguistic play, in the "poetics of indeterminacy"—and improvisation—which influenced artists from Richard Wright to William Gass to Bob Kaufman, to DJ Spooky. The future ignored T. S. Eliot's advice: Gertrude Stein's word-saxophone plays on.

Chapter 4

Banjos, Blackbirds, and Blue Guitars: The Soundworld of Wallace Stevens

Entering into Wallace Stevens's poetry demands an attention to sound different from that of the work of Gertrude Stein, or for that matter, Langston Hughes and Ezra Pound. Whereas Stein creates a singular language of defamiliarization based on sound through careful repetition and variation—making the world strange by making language strange—Stevens uses language to make strange worlds-within-worlds. Stein was criticized and parodied for writing in a language that was unfamiliar, even childlike; Stevens was lampooned for writing about things that seemed silly, like the settings and characters of a children's story: Watermelon Pavilions, Emperors of Ice Cream, Palaces of Hoon.

Sound, music, and noise, or combinations of all of those terms, is a vital—I would argue the most vital—element of these poem-worlds. Of all the poets I have discussed in this project, Wallace Stevens is perhaps the writer who most often and most eloquently asserts—in his poetry—a theory of improvisation. He never names it as such, yet his work is significantly illuminated if we take seriously the implications it has for improvisational theory. By emphasizing the changing nature of reality and the imagination, and the changes that each of those forces have on one another, Stevens's work provides a series of "notes"—as he would put it in one of his long poems, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*—about what it feels like to live in a mutable universe.

Like the other poets discussed above, Stevens's poetry cannot be separated from the African-American aesthetics that contributed to some of its underlying thematic features, despite Stevens's own sometimes racist attitudes towards those influences. And like Stein, the connections between William James's Pragmatism and Stevens's poetry are strong. If Stein pursued Pragmatic poetry versus philosophy, Stevens's poetry could be considered philosophical poetry depicting various modes of existence from a Pragmatist viewpoint. Albert Murray has defined improvisation as the ability "to hang loose and get the maximum"; Wallace Stevens's poems present an ambulatory—in the Jamesian sense—way of hanging loose within a world of constant change.[1]

In tracing this improvisational world in Stevens's work, I'll first start by sketching out his poetics as they relate specifically to music, followed by a survey of some of the specific sounds in that world. This chapter closes with a discussion of Stevens's improvisational poetics in relation to the philosophy of William James.

Music, Feeling, Sound: Listening to Stevens

I. Musical Poetry and Poetic Music

Music is essential to Stevens's articulation of new cognitive and aesthetic possibilities within a universe where "the world is ugly, / And the people are sad" as his poem "Gubbinal" sardonically states (69).[2] Over the last several decades there has been a critical re-evaluation and heightened interest in the ways in which Stevens's linguistic experimentation functions as more than merely "wordplay"—a feature which earlier readers and critics found frustrating or childish (Hugh Kenner, for example, could not see past what he saw as Stevens's Edward Lear-style nonsense).[3] Giles Gunn, echoing Richard Poirier's work on Stevens, suggests that the "obstacles that language places in the way of (what [John] Dewey called) the 'quest for certainty' afford significant opportunities, both cognitive and affective, for further knowledge, for the revelation of what Wallace Stevens meant by 'ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.' "[4] It is no coincidence that this formulation of one of Stevens's central concerns—the way in which poetry can be used to paradoxically go beyond the limits of conventional language and cognition—is cast in aural, potentially musical diction. The "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds," are the last words from *The Idea of Order at Key West* (105–6), a poem which describes and inscribes a sort of "thought-song" and is one of the most lyrical and succinct examples of Stevens's ideas about epistemology, language, and sound.

Richard Poirier states that, for Stevens, "the self-dissolving or deconstructive tendencies inherent in language are taken for granted and without anxiety."[5] Stevens's use of music is linked to those tendencies of language which Poirier dubs "self-dissolving." Stevens's linguistic "play" is in fact never very far from music, and often claims, from within the poems, that it *is* music. If language can at best only *provisionally* "mean" or "represent," then music can do so to an even lesser degree, or maybe not at all (unless we deliver a *linguistic narrative* to describe the music). For Stevens this problem is an opportunity to use music, and the musical qualities of language, as an *asset*—if organized sound cannot mean in the way language can, then perhaps it is a reservoir for other sorts of powers that the imagination can use to make and remake "ideas of order" (the title of one of Stevens's books).

From the ballad of his Harvard days, *Who Lies Dead?* (sounding something like the middle-English *Sir Patrick Spens*)—"Who lies dead in the sea, / All water 'tween him and the stars, / The keels of a myriad ships above, / The sheets on a myriad spars?" (481)—to his first published book bearing the name of a musical instrument, *Harmonium*, to his very last poem reputedly written on his deathbed, *Of Mere Being* (476), wherein we find the ubiquitous Stevensian trope of "inhuman birdsong," *sound* is a primary and often primal

force within Wallace Stevens's poetry. Stevens had originally wanted to call his *Collected Poems* "The Whole of Harmonium: The Grand Poem."[6] What is crucial about Stevens's use of sound and music and sound *as* music in his poetry is not that he uses it—after all, poetry was originally an art inseparable from music—but rather that for Stevens, sound is arguably the most important device for imagining new poems, new narratives, new ways of thinking.

In terms of narrative, Stevens's central story throughout his poetry could be described as the desire to use poetry to make reality better or to create a new, alternative reality; "the imagination," as Stevens states in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "pressing back against the pressure of reality."[7] Stevens's biography has often been read as the story of a man who used poetry to escape a banal world. While this is an oversimplification of the real story—Stevens would not have described his insurance job as banal, although he might have lamented his married life—it does offer a convenient shorthand for his poetic project.

Stevens was involved, like Stein, in the world of visual art. Yet Stevens was also a musical connoisseur and an amateur pianist, singer, and guitarist.[8] Furthermore, his poetry presents an aesthetic of music that is more radical than many modernists. Despite his own relatively conservative musical tastes—he listened to and owned records by *avant-garde* composers like Schoenberg, but was more fond of the piano music of Bach and Brahms—the ideas about music in his poetry put him in line with the likes of John Cage and other twentieth-century zealots of noise and sound as music.[9] In Stevens's poetry, as John Hollander has asserted, "the figure of noise as music is almost *donnée*."[10] Stevens's poetry presents a vast catalogue of musical elements, as Hollander notes:

> Pianos, oboes, orchestras, tambourines, and songs; the musics of Mozart and Brahms, and all the bird songs and other noises of nature; sounds of language deconstructed into vocables; the visionary phonetics of transcendent tongues; music claimed for language as well as language claimed for music; music abstract and concrete, music simply or complexly figurative . . . Stevens' poetry is suffused with systematic sound.[11]

Frequently, too, the sounds associated with jazz and other popular forms of music are figures in Stevens's work for the liberatory soundscape of the imagination. Language, sound, noise, and music frequently combine in Stevens's work to become interwoven layers of the imagination. In this commingling of music, noise, and language, Stevens's poetry paradoxically uses language to build poems that live on the border between semantic meaning and music.

His first book of poetry, *Harmonium,* was noted from its first appearance as being particularly noisy—as if the book were imitating the drones and melodies played on the instrument of its namesake.[12] The harmonium is a European instrument, found in several sizes from a household organ to a smaller, more compact version—essentially a portable organ where one hand is used to pump

the bellows and the other hand is used to play the keys—that became widely popular in India after Christian missionaries brought it to accompany themselves with while singing hymns.[13] In one of the volume's poems, *Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,* the speaker contemplates the specificity of thought and language—and music—to particular places. He states:

> There are men whose words
> Are as natural sounds
> Of their places
> As the cackle of toucans
> In the place of toucans.
>
> The mandoline is the instrument
> Of a place.
>
> Are there mandolines of western mountains?
> Are there mandolines of northern moonlight? (41)

This poem encapsulates an implicit question of *Harmonium*, the question of how to re-imagine the sounds and images of language in a novel and meaningful way; how to take the "words and instruments of a place" and make them work in a new place—bringing the harmonium and the mandoline (also, incidentally, an instrument popular in South India) from the West to the East and back again, to a place that is new, a place not on any map but that of the imagination. In *Harmonium,* music becomes a tool to develop new words and new worlds.

The poetic and metaphoric use of music in *Harmonium* is close to, if not actually, becoming "real" music. Poems like *Ploughing on Sunday* or *Bantams in Pine-Woods*, for example, turn their funny-serious speech-acts into Dada-esque sound-songs. John Hollander asserts that "To say that this music—high, low, noisy, verbal—is metaphorical is surely not enough."[14] And Albert Cook implies that Stevens's music is a kind of new form of music-language, saying that "music is not simply a metaphor for Stevens' poetry. It is a deep analogue to it. In music the communicative structures are multiple, like those in language; its signs are displaced, as those in poetry at its full depth can be enlisted to do, too."[15] In *Ploughing on Sunday*, for example, the rhythm of the poem hijacks its semantic meaning midway through, creating a kind of poor man's *solfeggio* or sight-singing system in the fourth stanza:

> Tum-ti-tum,
> Ti-Tum-tum-tum!
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Spreads to the sun. (16)

Regarding this passage, Anca Rosu suggests that "The nonsense lines actually stand at the center of the poem and rhythmically contain it altogether. It is as

if the speaker were trying to teach us to listen to the poem."[16] Stevens forces us to notice the strangeness of language by surrounding onomatopoeia with repetition and rhythm.

The insistence on sound and music as sound is so strong in *Harmonium* that the longest poem foregrounds the diverse sounds of the letter C—*The Comedian as the Letter C*, a move that critic Robert M. Crunden suggests is Stevens' homage to the impressionistic seascape of Debussey in *La Mer*.[17] Such arguments for hearing analogues to Stevens's poetry in the compositions and formal structure of his contemporaries or influences are, for me, not the central evidence of his musicality, however. Music in Stevens goes much deeper, forming in fact a *theory of music*. This theory is that music can be anything, and that sound, noise, poetry, thought itself, is music. It must be emphasized that the category called "music" in Stevens's poems can be defined as and is represented as all of the things we might usually divide up into categories like "music" or "noise" or "sound." The significance of this theory, or rather, the effect of this theory, is that the world is now conceived of as a vibrating, constantly changing soundscape, where ideas, images, poems, nations, ideologies, etc. are all able to be shaped and reshaped by the poet, like a musician manipulating soundwaves to make music.

As Eric Prieto has noted of the pursuit of "actual" music in poetry however, Stevens's "musical" poetry is not and cannot "be" music—it is poetry.[18] Like all printed poetry it exists as a (usually) silent text to be read, rather than heard or sung. Calling poetry "musical" is an important and useful metaphor, but it remains a metaphor, since "without the basic semantic mechanism of language—denotation—literature cannot exist."[19] Yet the philosophy and aesthetic surrounding what would constitute music elaborated in Stevens's poems *includes* poetry itself, along with birdsong, and even the movement of thought. In other words, even while Stevens, like most poets, is interested in creating what we might call "musical" poetry—poetry that features rhymes, rhythms, metrical variation, and other sonic elements that seem cued to features found in musical expression like song—Stevens also creates "musical" poetry in that the thematic material of the poems encompasses a theory of music.

Furthermore, the "nonsense" in his poems, such as the "tum-ti-tums" in "Ploughing on Sunday," the "hoos" in *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction,* or other sounds which are not actual words in any language, are signs of Stevens's emphasis on sound per se, over and against the semantic meaning of language. This makes his work different from that of other modernists interested in music and sound. Nowhere do we find in Stein or Hughes, for example, the kind of sounds that we find in Stevens. Stevens certainly takes delight in language, but he also employs the tools of language—letters which can possibly transcribe meaningless sounds—to create the sonic dimensions of his poems.

The difficulty in talking about this theory of music as an *analogy* for something else, however, stems from the fact that Stevens and his poetic speakers so

often insist that what they are doing *is* music. This is a change from the older concepts of music-in-poetry, where music is joined together with language to create an über-medium (the Greek sense of *mousikê* which lived on in English poetry, in one form or another, at least until the Romantic era—encompassing a role for poetry and music in the music-of-the-spheres, and in Romantic poetry, in the divine, pantheistic natural music of Coleridge's "Eolian Harp") or where music was a convenient metaphor for the voice of the poetic speaker to cast his lyrics in—lyrics however, which were not actually supposed to be sung—and were probably often silent, "closet lyrics."[20]

And while Stevens's sounds are often heard in the mind's ear, so to speak, the impression of his poetry when taken as a whole, filled in the way that it is with such ubiquitous sound, is aural and musical in way unlike most other poetry; even, arguably, the musical poetics of Stein or Hughes. In fact, it is precisely because Stevens mixes up so many variations on his theme of music that the poetry becomes, for lack of a better word, musical: the "whole harmonium." Rather than experimenting so insistently with repetition and variation like Stein, or matching musical forms to poetic forms like Hughes, Stevens creates a multilayered soundscape where the distance between language and sound and music is radically condensed. His poems are black ink on the page, but they are also bursts of sonic action, the traces of synaptic energy caught in the oscilloscope (or piano keyboard) of poetry.

Because sound and music are so often connected with the imagination and cognition in Stevens's work, what the poems say about music is key to Stevens's conception of the mind and the imagination in the world at large. While early critics dismissed Stevens's poetry as nonsense, when viewed from the perspective of music we can begin to see and hear Stevens's work in a new way. Stevens himself cautioned that "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" and that "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have."[21] And while it would be misleading to take these statements literally—just as Stein's poetry is not meaningless—Stevens points us to the importance of other kinds of "meaning," beyond the semantic meanings we look for in words.

Meaning in music, despite its reliance on a whole range of culturally-distinct aural cues, is even less grounded than that of the arbitrary sounds of words that make up language. Like Stein, Stevens used this already inherent instability of sound-in-language to create poems that foreground sound. Yet unlike Stein, who rarely wrote *about* music even as her poetry was, as I have argued, so based in the aural dimension, Stevens further directs us to *hearing* his ideas and images because they are so often images and ideas about sound. Barbara Holmes, who to date is the only critic to devote a book-length study to Stevens and music, has noted that Stevens was an "expert listener": "Sharing neither Pound's nor Auden's musicological avocation and formal training, Stevens, nonetheless, acquired a musical sense so critically acute that a conjunction of the poetical and musical arts in his work was inevitable."[22]

Even in a poem like *The Snow Man*, which presents such a striking *visual* metaphor of a "mind of winter," Stevens completes the image with a description of a synesthetic process of sound-as-sight:

> . . . the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (8)

The listener beholds—*hears and sees*—the nothingness of reality, a *koan* like Stein's "sound has no volume" from *Tender Buttons*.

But Stevens's musical poems also highlight the effects of the imagination and the creative process, the way it feels to be affected by and to have an effect on the world. For Stevens, music is always more than sound; it is a deeply mental as well as physical process, spurring thoughts and memories into motion. In a 1909 letter to his soon-to-be-wife he echoes Proust (and Jung) in his description of music:

> What is the mysterious effect of music, the vague effect we feel when we hear music, without ever defining it? . . . It is considered that music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory [sic]. I do not mean our personal Memory—the memory of our twenty years and more—but our inherited Memory, the Memory we have derived from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable, in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions of men and women now dead . . . It is a Memory deep in the mind, without images, so vague that only the vagueness of Music, touching it subtly, vaguely awakens [it] . . . [23]

As John Hollander notes, this focus on the experience of music, the feeling of "vagueness" "without images," versus an "understanding" of its meaning, is also something that unites poetry and music: "It is also generally agreed that the materials of musical languages do not carry 'meanings' either; in fact, the phrase 'music of poetry' would generally be defended as useful because of the apparent similarity between the ways that music affects us and the manner in which formal, non-semantic poetic elements contribute to our experience of poetry."[24]

The experiences of music and poetry for Stevens rely on an almost mystical yet embodied, visceral connection to the material, which in turn creates a contemplative mood in the listener and musician. In a poem written shortly after the above letter, from a chapbook presented to his wife called *The Little June Book,* Stevens anticipated his later musings on music in *Peter Quince at the Clavier* and *The Idea of Order at Key West*:

> He sang, and, in her heart, the sound
> Took form beyond the song's content.

She saw divinely, and she felt
With visionary blandishment

Desire went deeper than his lute. (514)

Here, the singer (who would later be transformed into a woman in *The Idea of Order at Key West*) triggers the deep memory in the listener, causing "visionary blandishment" and deep desire. Music is both the trigger for and the embodiment of this "vague" meaning. Stevens expresses this connection most succinctly in the opening of his poem *Peter Quince at the Clavier*:

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the self-same sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling then, not sound. (72)

Here, Stevens's revision of Shakespeare's "rude mechanical" Peter Quince delivers an insight not uncommon to most listeners and performers of music, but one that nevertheless has interesting implications for a definition of music. Peter Quince expresses not only the "vague" feeling that music brings, he also defines this feeling *as* music. If music is feeling, then "music" can be silent, with "no volume." Joan Richardson has noted of this poem that "in Stevens's alignment of thinking feeling, and desiring with music, he uncovered, as the concealed spring, the same prime motive that Darwin in his *Notebooks* points to: pleasure, most specifically, pleasure as the satisfaction of appetites and the erotic."[25]

This is one of many instances in Stevens's poetry where music is defined in ways that go beyond conventional categories of harmony, melody, and rhythm. In Richardson's reading (and in the work of scholar and dancer Barbara Fisher, who has written extensively on desire and eros in Stevens), the "play" in playing music is linked to the playfulness and competition of sexual desire.[26] Thus, music is not only feeling, sound, and thought, but also a defining feature of human evolutionary psychology—an interesting notion, given the lack of seriousness that some recent evolutionary biologists and linguists like Steven Pinker have given to the role of art and music in human evolution.

Michael Faherty has suggested that the musical ideas in *Peter Quince* were potentially a version of painter Wassily Kandinsky's synesthetic theories about color and sound. The work of both Kandinsky and Stevens were published in *The Little Review*, and Stevens appreciated Kandinsky's art and ideas.[27] Stevens's acquaintance and fellow poet, William Carlos Williams, apparently was influenced in his own poetic improvisations as much by Kandinsky's views on the technique as he was by jazz—another strand in the multiple threads of improvisational aesthetics to influence modernism.[28] Kandinsky describes

color as "a medium that has a direct influence on the soul. The color is the key, The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that brings the human soul into vibration by playing the *appropriate* keys."[29] Faherty, using Kandinsky's model as a guide, suggests that "Stevens, in the role of Peter Quince, is capable of producing music that can penetrate to the 'soul' of those who hear it, nature itself can play upon the keyboard of his 'soul,' whether through . . . the unidentified 'you' of the poem, or any other natural object."[30]

Like Coleridge's Eolian Harp, the keyboard here transforms into the soul, itself a version of the exterior but usually invisible world of nature—invisible because we are *looking* rather than *listening*. Coleridge's question "what if all of animated nature / Be but organic harps diversely framed / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze" is answered by Peter Quince's music, which is a combination of various versions of music: "real" music, the music of thought, the music of feeling, and the music of the interaction between humans and nature.[31]

This might also be a kind of music that John Cage would recount in his realization that there was nothing in life that was *not* music: since music is made from sound, and since sound—even sound inside of one's own body—is always present, music is always, literally, in the air and in the blood.[32] William Fitzgerald describes this sort of music in his reading of *Peter Quince*: "One of the things that we feel when we listen is our own body, listening. Listening itself, in which our bodies are tuned like instruments, is a kind of music."[33]

This listening, and the embodied music that it makes manifest, is also the subject of *The Idea of Order at Key West*. Significantly, *listening* to Stevens recite the poem enables us to hear his particular "music of feeling." Although it does not bear the same traces of sonic energy that Gertrude Stein's voice does, Stevens's reading voice offers interesting insights into his poetry. Stevens's refined, Northeastern accent immediately works to resist notions that his poems are nonsensical. This is not just a sign of correct pronunciation or the proper diction of older times, but a sign that his poetry was serious play.

In his reading of *The Idea of Order at Key West,* the way in which Stevens uses space and silence between lines, and the measured cadences, delivered in an almost sad baritone (the recording we have available was made in 1955, the year Stevens died), paradoxically echoes the "silent" music of the mind that Peter Quince describes.[34] And again, unlike other Modernist figures who hammed up their reading (Pound with his Yeatsian drawl, Eliot with "doing the police in different voices," Stein in her odd, boppish repetition and variation), it seems as if Stevens initially downplays his reading in order to foreground the "silence" of his sound-world.

As a reader of his own poetry, Stevens is patient, slow, insistent. Stevens once remarked: "I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly."[35] Yet the poem, and Stevens's reading of it, attempts to separate and discriminate sound—"The song and water were *not*

medleyed sound"—in order to focus on the particulars of the speaker's (and the woman/muse's) song (105, my emphasis). The sounds of nature and the sounds of thought do not become "medleyed sound," singing polyphonic, yet separate songs; they are transformed instead into a music that the poem *itself* is a figure for, a speech act of. The last stanza seizes on this fusion of natural sound and singing with its passionate description of "The maker's rage to order words of the sea . . . In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds"—making a new kind of music (106).

The "mental music" described in Stevens's poems is thus made up not only of its sounds but also its lack of sounds, its pauses and gaps, which allow the mind to meditate on the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." In a Cagean sense, there is never a lack of sounds, of course, but there are contrasting volumes of sound, which we can name as more or less quiet. Stevens knew, like Cage and like their earlier American visionary, Emerson, that a great tool of sound, paradoxically, is silence. Emerson states in his journals: "What unreckoned elements the orator carries with him, for example, silence. He performs as much or more with judicious pauses, as by his best stroke."[36] *The Idea of Order at Key West*, then, demonstrates that thought and silence, (or reading a poem on the page as we are accustomed to doing), are part of the larger music of order-making—the organization of sound in our mind into a song.

But has the definition of music in Stevens's poems become so broad as to be functionally useless? If music is everything, then how does it really differ from saying that "poetry is everything" or "thought is everything" (or, indeed, "improvisation is everything")? Here it is helpful to turn to John Cage's 1937 pronouncement that "If this word 'music' is sacred and reserved for eighteenth-and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound."[37] If poetry, for Stevens, was a way of "pressing back on reality," then a poetry that incorporates the music of the body, of life, of nature, of the mind, into its structure eventually becomes the music that Cage describes as "a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play."[38] Cage goes on to state that: "This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."[39]

Cage's assertion about "getting one's desires" out of the way of life dovetails with Richard Poirier's notion of "writing off the self" that he applies to an Emersonian lineage of American writers including Stevens.[40] This would seem to contradict Richardson's thesis about desire in Stevens, but we might also posit that the rejection of such personal desire leads to a more polymorphous sexual space, where identity itself is caught up with all other identities just as the sounds that limit what is and what is not music are all mixed together.

The loss of self is a not a loss of desire, but a recognition of the way in which the self is contingent on other selves—Stevens's grand "Harmonium" or "Memory" which encompasses past, present, and future lives. Stevens's music, or rather his preference for the non-semantic, nonlinear, nonsensical features of music, is the primary way that his poetry is able to create a new reality where, as Poirier states of much of Stevens' work, the self is "obeying random instructions of a consciousness released from any clear sense of itself, as if the comfort and pleasure his verse affords have less to do with sentiments or beliefs than with the casualness of his hold upon them and with the inadvertent discovery, as in 'The Rock,' that belief may adhere to forces mysteriously inherent in nothingness . . . "[41]

The "nothingness" is not a negative space, however, but rather another figure for the "silence" of music, the sound of thought in a stream of an ever-changing world, where poetry and reality meet, break apart, redefine one-another and continue indefinitely. The ethics of a music of everything is that we can never rest in finality on the last note, the last pronouncement of law or morality. The music paradoxically continues because it can never be captured. It is ephemeral and ghostly like the ghostlier demarcations of meaning which humans are constantly making and losing and making again. This ethic also demands, precisely because it recognizes the ephemeral nature of any expression, that each poem or song or performance be taken as the world-in-miniature *at that moment*; a moment that might be the last. As Theodore Sampson states, "in Stevens' case, music is an intrinsic quality of his mind, grown out of his intense and constantly changing response to life and self."[42] "This is old song," says the speaker in *Metaphors of a Magnifico*, "That will not declare itself / Yet is certain as meaning . . ." (15). All in all, it is a music of changes—to paraphrase Cage's compositions based on the *I Ching*—and this changing music is rife with improvisation. Stevens's world of music is a world where improvisation defines consciousness: a mind that changes in wild flights of creation, even as it learns to be contemplative towards the coldness of reality.

In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of one of the most important figures in this improvised soundscape: birdsong.

II. For the Birds

> *On the whole, birds appear to be the most aesthetic of all animals, excepting of course man, and they have nearly the same taste for the beautiful as we have. This is shown by our enjoyment of the singing of birds, and by our women, both civilised and savage, decking their heads with borrowed plumes, and using gems which are hardly more brilliantly coloured than the naked skin and wattles of certain birds.*
>
> *Charles Darwin, from* The Descent of Man

Stevens's language is most electric and strange when it is concentrated on music and sound, and these sonic dimensions are often heightened when he expresses them in terms of natural sounds. He frequently develops a soundscape that reminds the reader of Romantic poetry, with its emphasis on the sounds of nature as a sort of primitive music. Yet Stevens often takes this metaphor to a different place, having his speakers revel in the oddities of natural sounds, and how linguistic and cognitive movements are in turn strange like the music of nature; or, in fact, how all of these things are blended together in a "dissonant" harmony. Of the natural sounds which Stevens employs to trace the awe and strangeness which his speakers encounter, birdsong is perhaps the most common and most illustrative.

The earliest "weird bird" in Stevens work is probably the "pure-voiced robin" from a sonnet sequence he wrote in 1899. The 20-year-old poet was in a Romantic mood, but already the sounds of nature in his poems mix with a uniquely American voice:

> A pure-voiced robin had sent forth a ray
> Of long-impending beauty, to allay
> Her wild desire; as though her deep unrest
> Was in a moment's minstrelsy uphurled
> Sweet-startling from her heavy-laden breast. (484)

The bird takes on anthropomorphic longing to express herself in song, "allaying wild desire" and putting a formal, artistic shape to her "heavy-laden" feelings. Through song, the emotions and meanings of the creature are expressed, almost as if forced out under explosive pressure. The sign of the song is the poem, but the signified meaning of the song is beyond the poem's semantic range; the only reference to what it might literally sound like is contained in the alliterative phrase "moment's minstrelsy." We can hear Stevens practicing the cadences and timbres of older English poetry, and yet the "moment's minstrelsy" is an early sign of the more unique figures of speech which Stevens would cultivate. Minstrelsy in the context of late-nineteenth-century America would connote a musical world beyond love-songs by troubadours. An American minstrel would imply an interpreter of popular song, often performing in blackface. Within the Romantic birdsong American sounds are lurking; an erotic, racialized soundscape that Stevens employed throughout his work, which I will discuss in more detail later.

In *Harmonium*, Stevens's first published volume, strange birds and their strange songs are featured widely. The poem *Domination of Black* is a black comedy, a query into the meaning of the peacocks' cry. The poem's mood might be influenced by Stevens's knowledge of Longfellow's *Evangeline*, which opens mysteriously: "This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks . . . stand like Druids."[43] It is very likely that Stevens had Longfellow in mind, given that the elder poet was one of his wife's favorite authors, and

that Stevens was known to sometimes recite his work.[44] In *Domination of Black*, the poem's speaker is lost in a similar almost magical, synesthetic hue and cry of color, shapes, and sounds. Everything in the poem keeps turning, moving, and turning into something else:

> I heard them cry—the peacocks.
> Was it a cry against the twilight
> Or against the leaves themselves
> Turning in the wind,
> Turning as the flames
> Turned in the fire,
> Turning as the tails of the peacocks
> Turned in the loud fire,
> Loud as the hemlocks
> Full of the cry of the peacocks?
> Or was it the cry against the peacocks? (7)

Like Kandinsky's sound-colors, here the fire is "loud," and its flames "turn" in the wind like the leaves, which are—in turn—like the tails of the peacocks. All of this visual "loudness" is loud like the hemlocks, which are "loud" presumably because the wind is rustling their leaves, creating a synesthetic loudness of motion and color as the speaker's perception of the leaves—changed from the *needles* which natural hemlocks have—and their shadows blend together with the cries of the peacocks. This is the kind of Stevens poem that presents a familiar setting—a windowed room lit by a fire—made unfamiliar by the ways in which the speaker's *experience* seems unfamiliar.

The strange cry of the peacocks echoes in rhyme with "hemlocks," and both of these natural features become ominous in their mutual irreducibility in the speaker's mind. Why are the peacocks crying? What does the sound "mean"? We never get an answer, only learning by the end of the poem that the speaker "felt afraid" (7). The poem is like an animal fable stripped of its moral, and the sound-effects in the syntax hypnotize us into a weird (in the old sense of fate and magic) dread. Eleanor Cook notes that:

> Our syntactic turnings revise earlier readings as we turn the ends of lines, and these syntactic turnings are emblematic of the entire poem, which keeps turning back retrospectively and revising itself, as it moves forward, repeating. A whole system of conjunctive effects . . . works to lull us until the unaccountable breaks at the end of each stanza. The verse sounds like a kind of hypnosis against which the poem's breaks or disjunctions awaken us—awaken us to a sense that they have always been there in some form, as they have, from the moment of the title and the first line.[45]

The "domination of black"—the blackness of the night, the blackness of the hemlocks, the contrast between the bright illumination of the fire and the dark shadows—mixes with the domination of the poem's sound, which in turn

blends with the cries of the peacocks. Again following Kandinsky, the sounds of the poem are paradoxically colorful, and the flickering of the images of leaves, trees, peacock feathers, and, in the poem's final stanza, "the planets gathered / Like the leaves themselves" create the effect of a visual and aural strobe-light.[46] Here we see Stevens using repetition and variation of sound in a way different from Stein, but to a similar effect. Whereas Stein's repetitions focus more closely on the level of one or two words and punning on those words, Stevens's repetitions are often based on the ways in which verbs and prepositions transform throughout his poems. In *Domination of Black* these repetitions are encapsulated in the various "turns" of the phrases "turning in the / turned in the." The various deployments of these phrases foreground the ways in which things keep turning into other things, and hence the fluid nature of reality and our perception of reality.

For all of his emphasis on the sounds of nature, it is again important to note how Stevens revises the older Romantic notions of natural music. In *Autumn Refrain,* his reply-poem to Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale,* Stevens points out the specificity—and the Americanness—of his sound-world by reminding us that nightingales are not native to the United States, and hence a poetic perception of the song of the bird is the only perception available.[47] Instead of the nightingale's song we have only the "skreak and skritter of evening gone," the sound that the American grackles make—another variation of the famous Stevens blackbird, which I will discuss later (129). The fricative sounds in "skreak and skritter" and "grackles" emphasizes that these songs are not the ethereal plaints of the English bird. However, as the poem also asserts, poetic, imaginative perception can be just as trenchantly real and effective as "reality."

While I agree with John Hollander's reading of the poem and its musical tropes as "sad and beautiful" I take issue with his assessment that the silence referred to at the end of the poem represents a "silence of having nothing to utter."[48] As the speaker rejects the "yellow moon of words about the nightingale / In measureless measures, not a bird for me," he also hears something "beneath / The stillness of everything gone . . . Some skreaking and skrittering residuum." (129). The skreaking grackles reveal a deeper stillness beneath the desolation of the birdsong, "The stillness" which is "all in the key of that desolate sound" (*ibid.)*. This is another instance of the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" from a wintery mind. It is a sound mixed with the absence of sound, confirming mortality but also hearing the realities of existence. In other poems—as in *Peter Quince at the Clavier*, for example—Stevens will use this as a starting place for creation, a realization, as Cage has reminded us, that silence is never silence. There is always a residuum to be heard, a poem to be written, reality to be faced and hence transformed by the imaginative eye and ear. The poem itself, like *The Idea of Order at Key West*, becomes its title: it *is* the autumn refrain, answering and reworking the nightingale's and the grackle's song.

Another important poem in the catalogue of Stevens's birdsong is *Bantams in Pine-Woods*. This poem is one of Stevens's most "nonsensical" poems, filled

with wordplay bordering on childlike rhymes. The poem has historically been the focus of the larger debate regarding Stevens's seriousness as a poet. Louis Untermeyer declared in an early review of *Harmonium*, the volume in which the poem appears, that: "There are, in fact, many pages in *Harmonium,* which lead one to doubt whether its author even cares to communicate in a tongue familiar to the reader, he is preoccupied with language as color or contrasting sound values, scarcely as a medium for registering degrees of emotion."[49] Untermeyer claims that the first line of *Bantams in Pine-Woods* "[displays] an almost childish love of alliteration and assonance."[50] The poem's opening couplet is indeed a strange imperative, yelled by a speaker unlike any other in American poetry:

> Chief Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt! (60)

John Ciardi, writing several decades after Untermeyer's initial critique, takes a less conservative view of these lines, reflecting not only the ultimate shift in Stevens criticism, but also a heightened attention to and appreciation of the sound of Stevens's words. Where sound stripped of any easily determined meaning is a defect for Untermeyer, Ciardi declares that "Stevens teaches the [English] language its own singing possibilities."[51] The use of sound in the poem, far from limiting its emotional effect, actually reinvigorates the linguistic possibilities of poetry by making the language strange and new (and funny!).

The poem's second stanza takes a slightly more elevated tone, with its archaic term "blackamoor":

> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail. (60)

Here the "nonsense" results in a fairly sophisticated image: the sun cast as a slave, carrying the broad-feathered tail of the "damned universal cock," the bantam Azcan. The simile also makes the spreading tailfeathers a mirror-image of the shining sun, magnifying the bantam's size and color to be as big and bright as the sun. This is not poetry for kids (as if that would be a bad thing). Like Stein's attention to the arbitrariness of language's sounds, Stevens's use of language's sonic potential makes us focus on his syntax and diction with a renewed awe and skepticism for the rationality of language. As Richard Poirier asserts, "by a conscious effort of linguistic skepticism it is possible to reveal, in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal."[52]

This "something beyond" is not a neatly ordered universe governed by a rational deity, any more than it is a universe controlled by a "damned universal cock." Like many of Stevens's poems, *Bantams in Pine-Woods* can be read as a poem about the powers of poetry to create new ways of imagining and

thinking about the world. As we learn in the second half of the poem, there is a poet at war with the impetuous cock Azcan:

> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world.
>
> You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
> Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines
>
> Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
> And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos. (60)

This is a poem about chickens fighting in the woods, but it's also a manifesto where the inchling poet declares his right to making a world, Azcan's hoos be damned! The language is playful, serious fun. As Albert Murray reminds us (giving a slightly different version of John Cage's definition of play): "[p]lay is indispensable to the creative process . . . Play in the sense of competition or contest; play in the sense of chance-taking or gambling; play in the sense of make-believe; play also in the sense of vertigo, or getting high, or inducing exhilaration; play also in the direction of simple amusement or entertainment . . . and play in the direction of gratuitous difficulty . ."[53]

Stevens's poem is a play on many of these senses of play, and if we play along we join Stevens in a world where sound matters as much as sense. "Azcan" and "Iffucan" pun on "as-can" and "if-you-can" while possibly reminding us of words like "Aztec" and "Yucatan"; the repetitive insult "Fat!" doubles Azcan's "hoos." But these neologisms are also playful because they demonstrate the poet's control over sound, his ability to use language to both refer to semantic meaning and to go elsewhere. Whereas William Carlos Williams taught us that so much depends on the red wheelbarrow beside the white chickens, "Bantams in Pine-Woods" teaches us the importance of matching the damned universal cock hoo-for-hoo. Interestingly, the extant recording of Stevens reading this poem, as with his other recordings, does not sound like the nonsensical rant that early critics imagined. Perhaps the tired poet, now in his seventies, had abandoned the vigor of these early creations; or, perhaps, the poem's inner serious fun was confirmed.[54]

III. Bye Bye Blackbird, Hello

Before turning to Stevens's long poems, and his relationship to jazz and African-American aesthetics, I would like to discuss one more, and perhaps the most famous, instance of birdsong in Stevens's poetry: *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. This poem encapsulates many of the themes I have been elaborating about music and the improvisational, pragmatic dimensions of Stevens's poetics.

Why does *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, a poem that wears its visual emphasis on its title, as it were, seem so musical? There have been several musical settings of the poem, including Lukas Foss's 1978 chamber piece, and most recently an improvisational setting by jazz pianist Fred Hersch's trio.[55] There is even a classical chamber music ensemble called Eighth Blackbird.[56] Their name comes from the eighth section of the poem:

> I know noble accents
> And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
> But I know, too,
> That the blackbird is involved
> In what I know. (75–6)

Like Pound's imagistic fragments, like Hughes's blues images, this poem is the epitome of imagist poetics. Again, as Pound defines it, "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth."[57] Stevens's poem bears this out in its images *about* images. For example, section IV:

> A man and a woman
> Are one.
> A man and a woman and a blackbird
> Are one. (75)

Or section XII:

> The river is moving.
> The blackbird must be flying. (76)

These hermetic fragments indeed present us with a "complex" which makes the usual spatial and temporal rules come unhinged. This, too, is what actually makes the poem seem so musical; even though only three of the sections are explicitly about sound (VIII, V, and X) the poem's movement and energy in each of the "complexes" of words, like the movement of turning in *Domination of Black*, carries us into a space where meaning is conferred through the harmony or dissonance of ideas. Perhaps, then, it would be more accurate to say that the poem depicts a version of pragmatic improvisation, ambulatory thought at work. This is movement in time and space, but not in the way that we could regulate on a train-schedule or map. As William James describes brain-action: "It is just like 'overtones' in music: they are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it; and even so do the waxing and waning brain-processes at every moment blend

with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect of the processes which are at their culminating point."[58]

Each image of the blackbird mixes with all the other images, overtones, undertones, and domination of blackbirds, and we are of three minds, or thirteen minds, or three-hundred-thirty minds. Each stanza rests for a moment and then flies—if the reader is thinking, the blackbird must be flying. In one of his memorable figures for consciousness, James notes that "Like a bird's life, it seems to be an alteration of flights and perchings . . . the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest."[59]

What Stevens's poetry does, and what Pound's definition of imagism suggests that all art should do, is allow us to paradoxically focus on those "thoughts of relations, static or dynamic." Successful improvisation is merely the process of practicing this focus, attuning it to the highest degree. It also allows us freedom of choice, since we have the ability to move between options and not fixate on what Stevens would call in *Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction* the "necessary" but always fleeting "fiction of an absolute" (349). As Richard Poirier notes, even when Stevens's greatest imaginative feats seem to entrance us and transport us away from the vicissitudes of life, they are often also foretelling their own mutability, and they "ask us instead to be content with a calm, contemplative receptivity to the prospects of human dispersal."[60] In other words, the poems practice how to hang loose and get the maximum, knowing that life is transient. Improvisation, being of many minds, does not mean that we give up and become hedonists, nihilists, or suicides; rather, it allows us to embrace change and play with it.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is metaphorical music because it teaches us, like the silence turning into sound and back into silence in other Stevens poems, to listen better. It leaves open the following question:

> I do not know which to prefer
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after. (75)

As Poirier reminds us, Stevens poses similar kinds of questions in different voices throughout his work; here, the skreaking grackles of the sad world from *Autumn Refrain* become not the resigned silence of desolate sound, but rather the space in between skreaking and the memory of skreaking.[61] The blackbirds are all we've got: no nightingales. But it turns out that we can do a lot with blackbirds, after all, if we learn to view them and listen to them from thirteen sides.

Stevens published his poem praising the grackles in 1923. Three years later, Mort Dixon wrote the lyrics for the song *Bye Bye Blackbird*. Dixon confronted

the threat of metaphorical grackles with the inevitability of a new romance. The song's male singer relates that he's going to meet his lover in a late-night reunion, leaving the ominous blackbird in the past.[62] Yet Dixon's speaker, if we cast him as one of the "thin men of Haddam," from Stevens's blackbird poem, fails to see that he can't escape the blackbirds; as the speaker of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* asks, "Do you not see how the blackbird / Walks around the feet / Of the women about you?" (75). But the lyrics to the song belie the improvisational journeys that the pop melody subsequently took. Miles Davis, Keith Jarrett, and many others have since played the changes of the tune, in turn changing up the meaning of the leaving. In improvisation, we say hello to the blackbird and answer its skritter and skreaking with new flights of song; or as Lennon and McCartney offered in their contribution to the blackbird canon, we "fly into the light of the dark black night."[63] Lightness in dark: another way of looking at the blackbird.

Improvising Wallace Stevens

I. Ambulation and Imagination

> *To keep up with his rolling, vigorous gait and animated, frank and amusing talk, while striding alongside of him was both a feat and a privilege.*
>
> *Murray Seasongood, Colleague of Wallace Stevens*

As with the use of short, lucid fragments forming larger structures by Pound and Hughes, the form of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is a prelude to Stevens's version of longer poems, which allow for the give and take of wide imaginative flights. If the blackbird fragments offer a version of what William James describes as "ambulatory thought," then Stevens's long poems are long walks through consciousness and imaginative creation. In the act of thinking, James says,

> we know an object by means of an idea, whenever we ambulate towards the object under the impulse which the idea communicates . . . our idea brings us at least so far, puts us in touch with reality's most authentic appearances and substitutes. In any case our idea brings us into the object's neighborhood, practical or ideal, gets us into commerce with it, helps us towards its closer acquaintance . . . in short, to deal with it as we could not were the idea not in our possession.[64]

As with Stevens's poetic music, James here is ultimately using a metaphor; walking is like thinking, or rather, to think we have to walk towards things, to visit their neighborhood. But this ambulatory thinking takes on special significance for Stevens's poetry when we consider the amount of *actual* walking he did, and that he often composed his poems while walking.

Unlike many of his fellow American modernists, Stevens never became an expatriate in the Old World; his farthest and most significant voyages in "real" time were trips to Florida, Cuba, and Mexico. But from an early age, he walked, and in walking he began to develop the life that would flicker into fuller definition in his poetry. Stevens noted in his journal that "I love to walk along with a slight wind playing in the trees about me and think over a thousand and one odds and ends."[65]

Biographer Joan Richardson notes that by 1902 (Stevens was 23):

> His journal entries now were focused wholly on the half of his life spent walking and thinking during nights and weekends. There was hardly a mention of what filled his days. This pattern was mirrored later in his poetry, in which it is impossible to detect, through its lines, any of the daily activities of the Hartford insurance man.[66]

A walk of 15 or more miles every weekend (a journal entry from 1902 finds Stevens calling 17½ miles "a good day's jaunt") was not out of the ordinary for Stevens, and the line-lengths in the poems began to be affected by the pace of his breathing and walking.[67] He would regularly walk to work, and in his later years when his health prevented long weekend walks, or when the weather was bad, he would still venture out into the park near his house and track the minute environmental changes from day to day.[68] In his walks, says Richardson, Stevens found "at least temporary resting places from which he could survey himself and what he saw around him."[69] Again, here was contemplation on the go: what Frank O'Hara, in an urban context, would call (riffing on John Donne) "meditations in an emergency."[70] By walking, Stevens not only engaged in ambulatory thought that transformed into poetic creation, he also embodied the motion and rhythms of that thought and creation.

Richardson argues that "the improvisatory movements so close to jazz riffs" of Stevens's early poems sometimes "yielded to older classical progressions."[71] While the provisionality inherent in Stevens's long ambulatory poems might not be jazz, it is certainly exemplary of the kind of lengthy, improvisational poetry that I have noted in Pound, Hughes, and Stein's work. The structure in the poems does not reflect a musical form, but rather a technique of thinking which has its analogue in improvisational practice. As I have argued for Pound, Hughes, and Stein, Stevens also developed a technique for stretching out shorter, fragmentary ideas into malleable long poems. Unlike all of the other poets I have discussed, however, Stevens's long poems are more regular in their rhythmic and stanzaic form. Alex Ross has even argued that "it is in those poems—"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"—that [Stevens's] language is driest, his images dullest. Stevens came closer to the Supreme Fiction in short forms, in fragments."[72]

While I tend to agree with Ross that Stevens's shorter poems possess some of his most interesting and exciting aesthetic pleasures and philosophical insights, it is significant that Stevens also engaged in writing long poems. It allowed him

greater space to pursue the ideas of change, tracing out the stream of consciousness at length. But in terms of improvisation, the differences between Stevens's long poems and those of Pound, Hughes, and Stein is more of kind than degree; with Stevens, the long poem is still a forum for pondering the provisional nature of reality. In some sense, the "late Stevens" iambic pentameter and hexameter becomes the ideal rhythm for Stevens's tracking of change, his unique style that is about change even as it does not formally change. Like Pound's free verse, like Hughes's blues, and like Stein's repetition, Stevens's poetry takes on its own style and sound but also allows for many things—themes, ideas, and forms—to fit within that style. As Richard Poirier has noted of Stevens, "Even when the rhetorical shifts in his poetry are distinctly calibrated, they tend to induce a sense of drift, of exploratory meanderings, as one feeling dissolves into another or both are held together in a sort of suspended animation."[73] In another modernist context, this would be Benjamin's "frozen dialectic"—frozen as a mind of winter—which tracks motion and sound even as it watches and listens.[74]

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, perhaps the most exemplary long poem in the Stevens oeuvre, suggests its provisional nature in its title. Thus, while I take Marjorie Perloff's point that a poem like *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* seems evasive of reality—written in a time of war, it can be read as escapist rather than liberatory—I tend to see the poem in the terms of Richard Poirier's formulation, "writing off the self."[75] In other words, as the speaker of the poem imagines a supreme fiction, a world beyond the world, the mutability of the world and the impossibility of a fixed fiction (or reality) is acknowledged by the title itself and negotiated throughout the poem. Like many of Stevens's other poems that present contrasting moods, the *Notes* are never "of one mind." Lee Jenkins argues this point in a slightly different way:

> [Marjorie] Perloff suggests that "improvisation" is inimical to Stevens, and [Frank] Kermode suggests that "improvisation" is the key to reading "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." But the oscillation between the "possibles" may suggest instead that "Notes" is a poem of *counter-urges*.[76]

My reading of the poem as improvisational is based in the more nuanced notion that improvisation itself does not necessarily lead to the exclusion of a desire for certainty. Improvisation itself can never be "pure," and nor can "pure poetry" or a "supreme fiction." Part of the misunderstanding about improvisation across the arts is that non-improvisers often regard it as a magical process at best, or a purely free, intuitive and messy process at worst. But as Sun Ra consistently reminds us, there is discipline in freedom, and freedom in discipline.[77] This is perhaps the greatest lesson of improvisation, and the way in which learning to improvise holds potential insights for ethical behavior. There is no complete freedom, nor is there complete discipline; only when you can learn to navigate between the two can you begin to successfully function in reality or in fiction.

Such success is also part of reading and thinking as much as performing or writing. Speaking to the way in which Stevens's long poetry (specifically *The Man With the Blue Guitar*) feels improvisational, Beverly Maeder foregrounds the experience of reading the poem as much as the way in which the words are transcribed on the page: "[we] have the "impression" that although we recognize certain recurring words and phrases, we are constantly surprised by the new syntactical patterns and other linguistic and prosodic ruptures of symmetry that interrupt what seemed to constitute a line of development."[78]

Stevens's long poems are thus structured forms that nevertheless play with our sense of narrative continuity and logic. They are systems created out of the moving mind, "recollected in tranquility" only in as much as the tranquility of a walk allows the brain to loosen the boring tranquility of routine and open itself to the subtler rhythms of life. Frank O'Hara would later develop an urban ambulatory poetics, putting a form on the formless but simultaneously hanging loose; preceding O'Hara and Stevens is of course Whitman, whose walks try to encompass all of America.

Stevens himself categorized the poles of discipline and freedom in the "unsystematic system" of the *Notes*. He paradoxically asserts that only by *not* trying to systematize the poem into a theory will you grasp its theory: "It is only when you try to systematize the poems in the NOTES that you conclude that it is not the statement of a philosophic theory. A philosopher is never at rest unless he is systematizing: constructing a theory. But these are Notes; the nucleus of the matter is contained in the title. It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction."[79]

And yet, as Lee Jenkins has argued, "the poem cannot reconcile its titular elements, the notes toward and the supreme fiction, an improvised playing and the more strident tones of a manifesto."[80] Like the three minds of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, Stevens's notes are moving, undecided, and mutable. They are ambulations towards the absolute, with the recognition that this is impossible and that the absolute is itself, a fiction. Like Beckett's formulation "I can't go on, I'll go on," Stevens toys with an "unnamable" reality knowing that he will try to name it anyway, as he does in the first section of the *Notes*:

> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be. (330)

As Poirier has remarked of this moment, this is "an unsatisfiable aspiration, the dream of an impossible possibility: to see something without having to name it, without having to think about it, to see it without having to re-create it."[81] Yet despite this impossibility, the poet goes on, playing with what Albert Murray calls "gratuitous difficulty," because the poet also knows that it is impossible.[82] The game, then, is learning to live suspended in such a contradictory space, where we can write and play notes but never finish. Thus the

"abstraction" that occupies so much of Stevens's work—the first section heading of the *Notes* is "It Must be Abstract"—is close to the abstraction found in music, the abstraction from strict semantic meaning where naming locks us too firmly into the "malady of the quotidian," as Stevens calls it elsewhere in *The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad* (a man who cannot speak, sing, or otherwise sound such abstractions . . .)(81).

Hence the central position, again, of sound and music in the *Notes*, and the way in which the written notes give way to metaphorical musical notes. Early on in the poem we encounter the "hoo" sound from *Bantams in Pine-Woods*, now transformed three times in one section. First, the "hoo" is the indecipherable speech of an imaginary Arabian scientist:

> We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
> With his damned hoobla-hoobla-how,
> Inscribes his primitive astronomy (331)

Next, another variation of birdsong:

> Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
> And throws his stars around the floor. By day
> The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo. (ibid.)

And finally, expanded outward into the sounds of the ocean:

> And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
> Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
> Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation. (ibid.)

The regular, iambic pentameter tercets hide the wild metamorphic images and sound-play in these stanzas, formalizing Stevens's ambulations for a moment. But the poem and its sounds keep moving.

In the poem's second large section, titled with the improvisational maxim "It [that is, the "supreme fiction] Must Change," music and sound become even more important for the speaker's ambulations. We hear "booming bees" among other natural sounds (Stevens used similar alliteration in the title of the poem *Banjo Boomer*), and we learn that "Music falls on silence like a sense" that we can "feel, not understand" (338–9). Echoing the sounds of silence in *Autumn Refrain*, the "innuendoes" of the blackbird's whistling, and the feeling of Peter Quince's music, this music falling on silence is intuited through silent thought and emotion; music again cannot be appreciated without the contrasting silence: "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another, as a man depends / On a woman, day on night, the imagined / On the real" (339). Change demands contrasts, and for Stevens, utopias and paradises are boring and deadly. The unchanging world is the death of art and of experience, while "Death," as Stevens famously asserts in *Sunday Morning*, "is the mother of beauty" (55). Without change, there is no possibility of creation,

and without creation there is no poetry, music, life. In the *Notes* we hear birds cast in such a paradise as "minstrels lacking minstrelsy,"

> Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
> Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird
>
> Of stone, that never changes. (341)

Here, the birds' pitiful songs remind us of the more successful "moment's minstrelsy" from the sonnet of Stevens's early years (484). But these paradisiacal sparrows are bad singers because their song never changes, never reflects the moving (in both senses) emotions of life. In the penultimate section of the poem, the speaker presents an alternative to this unchanging dullness, calling the earth his lover, "my green, my fluent mundo" (351). Here, the world is the world created by the sounds—the words—of the poet. The fluency of the *mundo* requires the silences and musics of change, all of the fertile and wild unpredictability of life's ambulation.

Unlike Pound, who used the changing, fluid structure of the *Cantos* in an attempt to pin-down history and reality, Stevens's long poems are carefully structured stanzas insisting on the provisionality of life and art. They are only notes, not the definitive history or "tale of the tribe." Again, Pound's failure was not, ironically, that he couldn't make art reflecting the provisional nature of reality, but that he couldn't embrace his ability to do so. Stevens, on the other hand, often embraced it and used it as a central thematic feature of his poetry. As Rob Bennett has noted, Stevens reminds us that it is helpful to be a "connoisseur of chaos"; in a poem bearing that title, we learn that

> A. A violent order is disorder; and
> B. A great disorder is an order. These
> Two things are one. (194)[83]

Like a premonition of chaos theory, Stevens charts the illogical logic of disorder. Taking notes, he notes the fictions of reality and the realities of fiction.

II. Notes on the Guitar: The Sick Man's Blues

> *Tom-tom, c'est moi.*
>
> *Wallace Stevens, from* The Man with the Blue Guitar

In conclusion, I'd like to turn to discussion of Stevens's improvisational poetics as they relate to jazz and African-American culture. In his recent study of jazz in American literature, David Yaffe gives an important and illuminating reading of the cultural context of what might be considered Stevens's only "jazz poem," *The Sick Man*.[84] Published posthumously, this poem has been anthologized in Sasha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa's *Jazz Poetry Anthology,*

which coincidentally lists Hughes and Stevens next to one another in an appendix of authors who write about "Blues Musicians."[85] Given Stevens's attitudes towards race and towards popular music, however, it is probable that jazz for him was minstrel-based fun, rather than a serious art form. Stevens was not a jazz poet; but he was an improvisational poet whose interest in black culture, like that of Pound and Stein, was primitivistic and contradictory, simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the black Other.[86]

We know that his record collection did not include jazz (although he did own Cuban music, and visited Cuba on two occasions).[87] Yet like the other white writers discussed in this book, black aesthetic forms were an important underlying theme in Stevens's poetry. By the time Florida native Zora Neale Hurston and her friend Langston Hughes embarked on an ethnographic expedition through the South in 1927, Stevens had visited Florida several times, often accompanied by judge Arthur Powell. The Southerner Powell supplied Stevens with one of his most racist and emblematic titles, *Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery*.[88] Such "decorations," including the literal visual and sculptural objects, but extending to the verbal and sonic elements of black life, were also fascinating to Langston Hughes, who reveled in connections between the folk life of the South to the blues people of Washington, D.C. (where he had initially been influenced to start writing blues poetry).[89]

While Hughes fully embraced and respected black folk expression, Stevens sometimes decorated his own work with "darker speech."[90] From early poems like *Ploughing on Sunday* and *The Jack-Rabbit*, with their echoes of *Uncle Remus*-style dialect, to the jazz-tinged cubism of *The Man With the Blue Guitar,* to the later *Banjo Boomer* and *The Sick Man*, African American linguistic and musical elements played a part in the work of a poet who often seemed miles away from any country or people. As he noted in the *Adagia,* "One cannot spend one's time in being modern when there are so many important things to be" (912). Yet like most modernist writers, Stevens's poetics traced the influence of the black aesthetic, which would so profoundly transform twentieth-century global culture.

Like much in Stevens, however, it is tricky to parse which elements are mere exotic spices—like the *sabor Latino* of the phrase "fluent mundo," probably inspired by his trips to sunny Cuba—and which are underlying influences. Unlike even the infamously prejudiced Pound, Stevens had little interaction in the form of correspondence or otherwise with black artists—a notable and crude exception being his reaction to Gwendolyn Brooks being a judge for the National Book Award.[91] But then again, Stevens had little active contact, relatively speaking, with most people throughout his life. Joan Richardson notes that while Stevens was living in New York City, figuring out what to do after graduating from Harvard, he "roamed away from everything he had ever known, alone, without a job, feeling like one of the itinerant piano players who found their sustenance working in the disreputable establishments he passed [and] responded to the irregular syncopated rhythms of the new ragtime music."[92]

While it is doubtful that Stevens was hearing black musicians play what we would call "jazz" in these "disreputable establishments"—he would have to go to Harlem at least ten-or-so years later for that—this passage does express a truth about Stevens's aesthetic. What Stevens would express through his primitivized blackness was, like Stein and Pound, a contradictory desire to harness the creative life of African-American art while ignoring the social injustice that might cause black piano players, guitarists, school teachers, sharecroppers, scientists, intellectuals, and parents to become "itinerant" in the first place. As Aldon Nielsen has asserted, the "colorful exoticism" employed by Stevens keeps African-Americans connected to, yet unable to fully participate in, the social and aesthetic sphere of Stevens's world, and "places blacks in a position of homelessness outside the cultural tradition that the poet sees himself as operating within, if not, as in [T. S.] Eliot's case, purifying."[93] Or, as Yaffe candidly asserts, "Stevens apparently thought that black people could inspire poetry but not write it or judge it."[94]

Yaffe's reading of *The Sick Man* shows that the problem of the color line was never solved by Stevens, despite the poet's potential unconscious desires to address it. The poem in some ways exemplifies the frustrating missed potential of much anglo-modernist projects as a whole, and fails to see and hear that its speaker's desires were already being met in the music of the day. *The Sick Man* reflects Stevens's own ignorance about the sincere artistic collaborations and fusions that had been happening throughout the twentieth century (Yaffe notes Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige* as one example of a jazz and European art music mix).[95] But the poem also lucidly records the sickness still plaguing the post-war nation, charting the motions and sounds of "bands of black men" in the South versus similar singing in the North; all of it heard by a mysterious "listener," the titular Sick Man, who waits for a reconciliation of the sounds of North and South, a reconciliation that he "imagines" out of his own word and sound play: "The peaceful, blissful words, well-tuned, well-sung, well-spoken" (455).

Ultimately then, as with Pound, Stevens's own improvisational abilities as reflected in his poetry could not be fully reconciled with his own racist attitudes. But like "The Sick Man" he attempts to see and hear ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. The supreme fiction remains in notes, to be improvised and revised by a blue—or a blues—guitarist, or a whistling blackbird.

In his last poem, *Of Mere Being*, supposedly revised on his deathbed, Stevens posits that the "inhuman" song of another hermetic bird is not the thing that "makes us happy or unhappy." (476). It is the sick man's imagined song, the all-too human song, that we need. The birds go on singing, and we can hear their voices as skritters or as Romantic lutes. But what matters in "mere being" is the care we take in crafting fully humane songs, "well-tuned, well-sung, well-spoken." In the sound-world of his poems, Stevens offers the pragmatic reader positive notes towards a potentially real fiction, ghostlier demarcations of the possibilities of improvisation.

Conclusion

These are days when no one should rely unduly on his "competence." Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.

Walter Benjamin, from One-Way Street

The penultimate verse of Bob Dylan's 1965 song *Desolation Row* serves as an appropriate ending—or a new beginning—to the stories I have tried to illuminate in this book. Among the characters encountered on Dylan's apocalyptic street we find two familiar faces from American literary modernism. Dylan captures the tensions and aesthetic diversity of modernism in lines that cast Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot as the doomed Captains of a modernist Titanic, mocked by calypso singers.[1]

Calypso singers laughing at Pound and Eliot, on board a doomed ship—are the calypso singers safe on shore, taunting the poets, or are they all on board, together? If they are all doomed, then the calypso singers possess a levity that serves them well in this situation. Pound and Eliot, fighting for control of modernist discourse, are mocked by the black voices that they themselves appropriated mockingly. What side are you on? One reading of the song implies that we're all in the same boat; and even if we're safe on shore, we're still stuck on Desolation Row. Choosing sides too quickly might mean that we fail to see the connections between those sides.

Ezra Pound outlived Hughes, Stein, and Stevens. Pound biographer Humphrey Carpenter details that during his 1967 visit with Pound in Italy, Allen Ginsberg "played Beatles and Bob Dylan records to Ezra and chanted mantras to him . . . Ezra listened without comment."[2] Did Allen Ginsberg play him a copy of *Desolation Row*? Did the broken Pound hear the laughing calypso singers, and perhaps laugh at himself?

The argument in this book is guided by an attitude towards modernism from the vantage point of Dylan's street, and Langston Hughes's street, too—a mixed up, confusing, but humorous and potentially liberatory space. It's a street where Ezra Pound can meet up with Langston Hughes for a chat about the blues, where Stein's saxophone can speak strangely from the alley, where Wallace Stevens's birds can skritter with Charlie "Yardbird" Parker. A street where, as Hughes advises, you can't "let your dog curb you."[3] It is the space of American literature shot through with language and sounds from around the corner and the top floor of the ivory tower. It is a larger, longer street than the word "modernism" or any given literary or musical "school" can convey. It is the inheritance of the post-World War Two generation and the path that many post-post and poster children again walk down, spitting, laughing, awestruck or dumbfounded, pissed off or enraptured. It's the street you have to walk down to write American poetry or make American music—whatever that might mean now.

Improvisation, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this book, is not the province of music or any other performing art alone. It is both an aesthetic practice and a life practice, and while it is not inherently "good" or "bad," it can—when practiced and studied—aid both aesthetics specifically and survival in general. Of the poets discussed in these pages, only Langston Hughes could comfortably reference jazz culture and the improvisational spirit that fueled his life and work. For Ezra Pound, failing to embrace improvisation might very well have been the biggest missed opportunity he made. Fortunately, a diverse range of poets have taken up his legacy and transformed it, argued with it, and remixed it, taking the promising fragments and fashioning making something new. This is why I have spent so much time in this book exploring Pound: he seems to always come up in the most unlikely places; from corresponding with Langston Hughes to his influence on the English free improvisation group AMM, Pound's life and work remains provocative in every sense.[4] Partly for this reason, I find that looking at his work from the perspective of improvisation—reading pragmatically for the interesting inconsistencies he tried to patch up—can help to frame the larger implications of modernist practice as a whole.

As Mike Benveniste has noted of Pound's poetics: "whereas hypotactic, abstract discourse tends toward an ideological authoritarianism which vainly seeks to control or determine subjectivity, Pound's poetry, by virtue of its structure, could invite readers to produce knowledge, and, by their autonomous engagement with selected materials, subjectively invest in that knowledge at the affective level."[5] I would argue that this pedagogical function—producing knowledge through "autonomous engagement"—is a salient feature of any improvisational act, and indeed one of the important functions of improvisational art (or, for that matter, most art). Or, as Ajay Heble suggests, speaking of the uses of both contemporary cultural theory and jazz, improvisation can help us with "its insistence that we subject to rigorous and ongoing scrutiny the assumptions that shape our relationship to the world around us."[6]

The legacies of Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens have their own complicated twists and turns; one such twist being the fact that scholars are more comfortable grouping such disparate poets together for analysis. Thankfully the days of both a unified, coherent "High" modernism or a "separate-but-equal" Harlem Renaissance have passed, despite the fact that literature programs sometimes still rely on such obsolete categories to simplify the past. In terms of improvisation, however, the full stories are yet to be told. By no means is this book—despite the implication of my overarching title!—the end of any of those stories.

When I began this project, many of my colleagues assumed that I would be writing about post-World War Two authors; naturally, since from the end of World War Two onwards there has arguably been a significant increase in literature directly modeled on or influenced by jazz. Ironically, however, the importance of jazz as a musical genre at the mass popular level has declined since the 1960s, adding to the general lack of critical understanding regarding

improvisation per se. As Daniel Belgrad has argued, intellectuals and bourgeois taste-makers alike seemed to dismiss or misunderstand the deeper implications of improvisational activity in the 1940s and '50s, relegating what Belgrad dubs "the culture of spontaneity" to primitivist admiration or outright fear and hatred of the other: "The reason for this virulent and contradictory reception of spontaneity served as the scapegoat of both "highbrow" and "middlebrow" critics locked in their own cultural struggle during the post-war period."[7]

Nevertheless, the rise of what Belgrad dubs "the culture of spontaneity" post-World War Two has undoubtedly influenced a wide range of subsequent aesthetic, political, and spiritual movements. In terms of literature, some of these movements now have a significant body of critical thought devoted to them: The Black Mountain poets, the New York school, and the Beat poets, influenced by the improvisatory impulses of jazz, John Cage, and abstract expressionism, among other sources; the Black Arts Movement, embracing the nationalist dimensions of earlier African and Afro-diasporic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and *Négritude*, and combining them with a fierce dedication to jazz improvisation; the New Journalism's embrace of chance and multiple perspectives on "truth"; feminist, sexuality, and gender studies' significant engagements with alternative models of political action and linguistic/social structure; the Language Poets' interest in orality as much as visual and textual dimensions of poetics (especially in the work of Charles Bernstein and his devotion to documenting the recorded legacy of poetry); the work of various ethnic studies and post-colonial criticism and literatures to bring forgotten, erased, or otherwise marginalized perspectives back into focus; a whole range of post-modernist and post-structuralist thought that playfully broke down narratives of fixity and dominance by one voice (or Father, or Nation, or Identity)—all of these are examples of the rich terrain of post-war writing dealing with improvisation to a greater or lesser degree.

Instead of repeating the sometimes deleterious judgments of both pre- and post-war commentators and artists, the contemporary respect for and understanding of improvisation seems to be changing for the better. But the mission for this book has been to suggest that these practices have a longer history than merely a post-war perspective can account for, a history that has continuing relevance for our contemporary encounters with improvisation. The dizzying array of cross-cultural encounters, the prevalence of ever-changing information brought by ever-changing information technology, and the increasingly confusing and asymmetrical nature of warfare are just three rather disparate examples of where a more conscious attention to improvisation might be helpful. Whether we are trying to assess the aesthetic goals and effects of a given work, or unpack the thorny ethical questions that art can help us begin to answer (or ask more clearly), improvisation is well-suited (to paraphrase Raymond Williams) to become a "keyword" in our contemporary "structure of feeling." How this came to be is partly answered, I hope, by the wide range of discourse surrounding improvisation that I have detailed in this book.

Further Questions, Other Improvisations

The issue of what Philip Pastras calls the "method" of improvisation, where an author's work *appears* to be improvised but may not, in fact, be improvised, is something that deserves further study, and which became a challenge for my own conception of the meaning of improvisation in literature. While I have attempted to show that even "fixed" texts can exhibit improvisational effects, and that the binary of "improvised" and "composed" is ambiguous at best, it remains the case that there is literature for which it is less useful to discuss in terms of improvisation. If even the jazz-wary Pound can stand as a representative of improvisational poetics, then who can justifiably be said to be non-improvisational?

Rather than answering that question with a list of potential candidates, I'd like to provisionally suggest that our perspective on literary history as readers, as audience, may in the end be as important as the "original," "fixed," texts of any given author. Texts move through time and space, and they change as our perceptions of their context change. While we should be careful to discount or downplay the troubling aspects of a given writer's work, we should also, I believe, constantly keep open the "ethical quarrel" about both reviled and respected artists in order reassess how potentially reified and ossified our current perspectives may have become.[8] It has hopefully become clear in these pages that the ethics of improvisation are, like the practice itself, provisional; a "bad" improvisation does not necessarily mean a "bad" person, and likewise, a "good" improviser might not be the kind of person we want to model our ethical and moral universe upon. However, I do believe that a pragmatic take on improvisation, with the historical context that I have sketched out in this book, can possibly help us to learn from the past mistakes. As an improvising musician, such continuous dialogue with self and world is embodied in the musical practice, and I strive to make this part of my reading and writing practice as well.

I have focused on relatively well-known figures of modernism to suggest the ways in which improvisation has been important to the world that many readers of modernist literature are familiar with. Because of the historical importance that improvisation has held for marginalized communities, however, it follows that there are many, many other figures, which could and should be discussed in terms of modernist improvisational aesthetics—such figures may one day transform the canon of scholarship and popular opinion. For example, I have for the most part neglected to discuss the ways in which gender and sexuality have played a role in these stories; what would a gender-studies approach of improvisation in modernism look like?

I have attempted to sketch out some of the story of improvisation in modernism. There are many other stories, and many other trajectories that connect these writers to their subsequent protégés. Like an improvisation in jazz, the process can always begin anew in the next performance. As Derek Bailey once quipped, "Improvisation is a muddy ditch: it's where things

can grow."[9] Grown out of the mud of Desolation Row, improvisation has produced a diverse range of art. I hope I have done a decent job of tending to the garden, and planted the seeds for future study of this persistently prominent feature of American art.

Notes

Introduction

1. Bailey, *Improvisation*, ix.
2. There is, of course, a wealth of scholarship about *jazz* and literature, and much of that work has been crucial for this book. In particular, Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*; Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*; Ajay Heble's *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*; David Yaffe's *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*; and the work stemming from the Columbia Center for Jazz Studies, such as the edited volumes *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* and *Uptown Conversation: the New Jazz Studies*, have been touchstones for my own understanding of twentieth-century improvisational culture. For all the value of these studies, however, the notion of "jazz" often becomes a nebulous stand-in for many things, including improvisation, African-American culture, American culture, "cool," etc. While I am surely guilty of some of this same ambiguity in my use of the term "improvisation," my goal in this book is to point to improvisation specifically as both a practice and a technique in a wide range of modernist writing. Much of the initial thinking about these issues has been guided by one of the few texts in literary criticism that explicitly deals with improvisation and modernism in the same context: Philip Pastras's unpublished dissertation, *A Clear Field: The Idea of Improvisation in Modern Poetry*.
3. "Modernist energies" is a term that I have absorbed from my conversations with Giles Gunn, who often uses this formulation to describe the ways in which modernist artists fully tapped into or recharged aesthetic and social forces laying dormant in previous eras.
4. For one interpretation of Armstrong's statement, see John Szwed, *Jazz 101*.
5. The journal, based out of the University of Guelph, is titled *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation, http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/csieci/index*.
6. "Make it new" has become one of the hallmarks of modernist practice, absorbed by a disparate and diverse range of subsequent artists. See Ezra Pound, Canto 53.265, and Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 205. Subsequent references to Pound's *Cantos* will take the form of page number and canto number, as in this note. Page numbers refer to *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, seventh edition.
7. David Sterritt, discussing the "aura" of improvisation from a Benjaminian perspective, suggests that "an important reason for [improvisation's] high reputation in the modernist era may be twentieth-century uncertainties regarding the authenticity of artistic works and practices themselves" ("The Aura of Improvisatory Art," 164). Similarly, Daniel Belgrad argues that "A will to explore and record the spontaneous creative act characterized the most significant developments in American art and literature after World War II" (*The Culture of Spontaneity*, 1). My argument foregrounds the pre-World War Two engagement that modernist authors had with improvisation, further indicating the long history of improvisatory practice in American culture.

8. *The Black Atlantic*, 16.
9. Here I follow Marjorie Perloff's argument in *21st Century Modernism*.
10. Perloff, "Modernist Studies," 170.
11. On the Harlem Renaissance, see Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Also important is Jon Panish's argument regarding the significant difference in the ways in which white and black poets appropriated improvisation in *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1997). I am by no means undervaluing such arguments, nor am I attempting to recoup racist white poets; however, I do believe it is crucial to constantly reassess the complicated relationships between the diversity of American artists—especially when they were explicitly connected to one another as in the case of Pound and Hughes, which I will discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. Important representative studies that reinvestigate race in modernism, often with reference to music, include Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*; Michael Golston's *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*; Sieglinde Lemke's *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Seth Moglen's *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Aldon Nielsen's *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, and the volume of essays he edited expanding on this topic, *Reading Race in American Poetry: "An Area of Act"*; and Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature*.
12. *Terrible Honesty*, 3.
13. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 3.
14. I was helpfully reminded of these issues as I worked on this book in Canada.
15. *The Black Atlantic*, 1–2.
16. *Modernity at Large*, 46.
17. Edmundo Gorman, quoted in Giles Gunn, "Introduction," *Early American Writing*, xvi.
18. James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, (New York: Library of America, 1998), 137–42.
19. I use jazz definitions and analogies from the jazz world not only because they are relevant to my writers, but also because jazz theory/criticism is one of the main and only places where improvisation has been theorized. Other disciplines with some degree of theorization of improvisation are drama and dance. Thanks to Daniel Fischlin for reminding me of these issues.
20. *Thinking in Jazz*, 492. For another view of the linguistic connections between jazz improvisation and narrative/speech, see a relatively recent work on jazz improvisation by ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson entitled, not coincidentally, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
21. Thanks to Dick Hebdige for informing of the Greek sense of "metaphor."
22. Stephen Greenblatt, "Improvisation and Power," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 57–99. Greenblatt's definition of improvisation is instructive:

> I shall call that mode improvisation, by which I mean the ability to both capitalize on the unforeseen and transform given materials into one's own scenario.

> The 'spur of the moment' quality of improvisation is not as critical here as the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established. Indeed, as Castiglione and others in the Renaissance well understood, the impromptu character of an improvisation is itself often a calculated mask, the product of careful preparation. What is essential is the Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic, structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage. (60)

23. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
24. "Preface," *Invisible Man*, xxii–xxiii.
25. For an elaboration of this theme, see Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*.
26. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, eds., *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).
27. A refreshing mix of both of these traditions can be found in the two monumental volumes co-edited by Robert J. O'Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* and *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*.
28. *The Other Side of Nowhere*, 3, 25.
29. Lewis noted this in conversation during his lecture, "Living with Creative Machines." The text of some of this lecture has been printed as "Living with Creative Machines: An Improviser Reflects," in *Afrogeeks: Beyond the Digital Divide*, Anna Everett and Amber J. Wallace, eds. (Santa Barbara: Center for Black Studies Research, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007), 83–99.
30. Vijay Iyer noted this in a discussion with DJ Spooky from the 2008 Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium; "Improvising Digital Cultures," (panel discussion, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, September 3, 2008). Charles O. Hartman reminds us of the difficulties of clearly discussing the "improvisational" aspects of a piece of writing in *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 38.
31. "Composition" is paradoxically used by Jacques Attali to denote a liberatory music based in improvisation. See chapter five of *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*. Derek Bailey comments on the difficulties of defining the differences between composition vs improvisation; see *Improvisation*, 140. One of Bailey's sometime collaborators, drummer Eddie Prévost, argues that there must be some difference worth talking about between the two forms, however, indicating an ethical dimension to the improviser's ability to adapt. See his book *No Sound is Innocent* (Matching Tye, near Harlow, England: Copula, 1995). Thanks to Sydney Levy, Jocelyn Holland, and the participants of their course "Improvisation: Baroque to Digital" for helping to clarify these ideas on the continuum between improvisation and composition.
32. *The Other Side of Nowhere*, 16. For two other interesting explications of various dictionary definitions of improvisation, see Philip Pastras's chapter entitled "Definitions" (*A Clear Field*, 1–34) and Dick Hebdige's "Even unto Death: Improvisation, Edging, and Enframement."
33. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, 9.
34. Walser, *Keeping Time*, 7. Both this and the following quotation are from Robert Walser's incredible anthology of primary source documents spanning the whole range of jazz history, *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*.

35. Ibid., 8.
36. For views on hip hop's reception see Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). Ironically, now that jazz is somewhat institutionalized in the halls of cultural power—most notably, Jazz at Lincoln Center, directed by Wynton Marsalis—more recent black improvised music like hip hop continues to undergo the same kinds of primitivizing, racist treatment that jazz has historically encountered. Even more ironically, some of the condemnation of hip hop comes from within the jazz community itself, where an on-going identity crisis about what kinds of sounds and cultural aesthetics should truly define jazz still rages.
37. Lewis, "Improvisation after 1950."
38. Ibid., 133.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 139.
41. Ibid.
42. In his remarks at the 2007 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, Braxton expressed his admirable eclecticism, noting of his teaching schedule that "Next semester I have a class: Karlheinz Stockhausen and Sun Ra. And this semester I have a class: Max Roach, Lenny Tristano and Miles Davis. I am trying to combine masters. I am working on my Hildegard von Bingen [and] Wagner class." This lecture is available online as both a transcript and streaming video; see Anthony Braxton, "Keynote Address at the Guelph Jazz Festival, 2007, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 4, No 1 (2008) *http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/csieci/ article/view/520/1009*.
43. Cage, *Silence*, 5.
44. Rasula's article also indicates the possibilities for much further study of the trans-Atlantic, and, indeed, global, connections between Afrodiasporic aesthetics and non-Afrodiasporic cultures.
45. "Jazz as a Decal for the European Avant-Garde," 13. For an even more trenchant critique of Appel's book, see Eric Lewis's review, "Appel, Ellington, and the Modernist Canon," in Critical *Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2005), *http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php / csieci/article/view/21/55*.
46. I should note that Perloff is nevertheless open to the some of the arguments presented here, and I have benefited from her comments on portions of earlier drafts of this book.
47. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 156.
48. Ibid. Charles O. Hartman, echoing Perloff's assessment of a radical poetics operating via indeterminacy, suggests that T. S. Eliot's more conservative poetics temporarily eclipsed the improvisatory dynamic of William Carlos Williams and other modernists; see Hartman, *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 45.
49. Roach, "Beyond Categories," in Walser, 307. Roach never published this book, unfortunately.
50. Whether or not such commodification can be resisted by improvised music is still up for debate. Nevertheless, it is shocking to many listeners when they discover that recordings they thought were "live" have in fact been manipulated in the studio:

examples include Thelonious Monk's "Brilliant Corners" and Duke Ellington's Newport Jazz Festival performance of "Crescendo and Diminuendo in Blue," among others. Thanks to Karl Coulthard for pointing out this complex circuit of "live" and "simulated" sounds; see his essay "Looking for the Band: Walter Benjamin and the Mechanical Reproduction of Jazz," in Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation, vol. 3, No 1 (2007), *http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/csieci/article/view/82/426*.

51. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, iii.
52. Ibid., vi–vii.
53. Ibid., 14.
54. Ibid., 14–15.
55. Ibid., 15.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 16.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 4.
60. Abbott, "Garden Paths," 2.
61. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, 109.
62. For other perspectives on pragmatism and improvisation, see Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), and Walton M. Muyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Pastras also relies on Emersonian legacies in his study of modernist improvisation; see *A Clear Field*.
63. Pound disciple and post-war exponent of improvisatory poetics, Charles Olson, also used the term "field" to theorize his poetic practice; see Belgrad, *Culture of Spontaneity*, 122–41. Hugh Kenner also employs the notion of a "field" in his discussion of modernist writing in "Art in a Closed Field."
64. Henry James, "The New York *Preface*" from *The Turn of the Screw*, 119.
65. William James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, 898–9.
66. Henry James, "The New York *Preface*," 199–20. William James develops his notion of "the stream" in "The Stream of Consciousness"; see *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 171–90. I will elaborate on this essay in relation to Stein in particular during subsequent chapters.
67. Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 76.
68. Wallace Stevens, "To the One of Fictive Music," *Collected Poems and Prose* (hereafter cited as CPP), 70–1.
69. Eric Prieto, *Listening In*, ix, x.
70. Ibid., iv.
71. See, especially, Albright's *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and the Other Arts*.
72. Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," from *Shadow and Act*, 150–60. For Braithwaite on Eliot, see "History of the Voice" in *Roots: Essays in Caribbean Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 259–304.
73. Kenner, "Art in a Closed Field," 213.
74. The phrase "jazz consciousness" is borrowed from ethnomusicologist Paul Austerlitz, riffing on W. E. B. DuBois. See Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*.
75. Gunn, *Beyond Solidarity*, 194.

76. George Lipsitz calls this view "a fairy tale about cooperation, consent, and consensus." *Footsteps in the Dark*, 81.

Chapter 1

1. Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 156.
2. Ibid.
3. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, 9.
4. See Pastras, 12; and Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*. 177–221.
5. See Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).
6. Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*, 138. Recordings of Pound reading can be found on the PennSound website, *http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Pound.html*, accompanied by an excellent essay by Richard Sieburth, "The Sound of Pound: A Listener's Guide," *http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/text/Sieburth-Richard_Pound.html*.
7. Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 87.
8. Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 54.
9. Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 137.
10. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 230. The complete quotation regarding Pound's mistakes is: "Is the life of the mind a history of interesting mistakes? More pertinently: is the surest way to a fructive Western idea the misunderstanding of an Eastern one?"
11. Cantos will be referred to by their number and page number from *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, seventh edition.
12. Prieto, *Listening In*, xi–xii.
13. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, 14–15. See also my Introduction.
14. The details of Pound's career as a musician, composer, and music critic have been carefully detailed due to the work of mainly three people: composer R. Murray Schafer, editor of the monumental *Ezra Pound and Music* (listed in my bibliography under Pound's name); and the husband and wife team of composer Robert Hughes and choreographer/scholar Margaret Fischer, who have been meticulously performing, editing, commenting on, and publishing Pound's music over the past several decades. I thank the three of them for their comments on some of the material in this chapter.
15. See my Introduction, n. 63. Eco's concept, *The Open Work*, bears similarity to Calvino's concept of "the encyclopaedic novel," as detailed in his lecture "Multiplicity," from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Patrick Creagh, trans. (New York: Vintage International, 1988), 101–28.
16. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, Chapter Two, "The Catalogue," 35–91.
17. Thanks to Meg Worley and Porter Abbott for pointing out to me that the formulaic structure of oral epic may not be improvisational. For the latest insights into the world of oral epic traditions, see the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition website, curated by John Miles Foley: http://www.oraltradition.org/. Like many improvised situations, however, the distinction between composed, memorized, structured elements and spontaneous, ephemeral, free moments in oral poetry are

often difficult to detect, especially when taking into consideration the interaction between performer and audience. Overall, poets from Whitman to Pound and beyond have nevertheless fantasized about being able to "spontaneously compose" the perfect verse for any given situation.

18. For Perloff's discussion of Eliot's turn away from radical poetics, see her *21*st *Century Modernism*.
19. Pound defines an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." See Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," 200.
20. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 518.
21. Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 795, 861. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations to Pound's poetry (other than the *Cantos*) will refer to this collection, by page number.
22. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 66.
23. Pound, "Vorticism," 136.
24. See Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, particularly the "Introduction" and the chapter on Pound.
25. Fisher, "Ezra Pound: Composer," 14.
26. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 120.
27. Prieto, *Listening In*, xi–xii.
28. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 114–19.
29. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 25.
30. Ibid., 26.
31. *ABC of Reading*, 61.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 17.
34. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 27. The contemporary reader should note that Pound is here talking about "albums" of sheet music, not recordings (which did not exist in the modern sense of the term).
35. Ibid., 39.
36. Ibid., 27.
37. From Schafer's commentary in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 21–2. The same statement could be made about the radical form of Schafer's own compositions.
38. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 103.
39. Carroll F. Terrell, "The Sacred Edict of K'ang-Hsi," 80.
40. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 110.
41. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 528.
42. Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, 28.
43. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 107–8.
44. As with much of my foundational ideas about poetry, I am indebted here to Tenney Nathanson.
45. Kenner, *The Pound of Era*, 356.
46. Carroll F. Terrell, ed., *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 558.
47. Bailey quoted in Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 208.
48. See 98.693, and Terrell's commentary on the canto, *Companion to the Cantos*, 627–36.
49. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 114.
50. Ibid., 120.
51. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 278.

52. Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 882.
53. Pound quoted in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 893.
54. Ibid., 912.
55. Terrell, "The Sacred Edict of K'ang-Hsi," 81.
56. Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 912.
57. Charles Bernstein, "Charles Bernstein on Ezra Pound," 75.
58. See Michael Coyle, ed., *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, and Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature*. For a different take on the specifically rhythmic aspects of Pound's work, see Michael Golston's remarkable book, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*. Golston uncovers important links between Pound's interest in rhythm and theories of biological and racial "rhythms" prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Golston rarely delves into the specifically musical dimensions of this rhythmic fascination.
59. "Preface," *Ezra Pound and Music*, 3.
60. William Carlos Williams, quoted in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 61.
61. Richard Aldington, quoted in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 29.
62. I had the occasion to discuss Pound with Schafer in Kitchener, ON, on May 1, 2009, during the Open Ears Festival.
63. See Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*, 19–38, for some fascinating examples of Western art music improvisation.
64. Thomson quoted in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 312.
65. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 203.
66. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 29. Again, for a different view on Pound's interest in Rhythm, see Golston, *Rhythm and Race*.
67. Ibid.
68. Quotation and preceding information on Heyman from Faubion Bowers, "Memoir within Memoirs," 53–66.
69. Ibid., 59.
70. Ibid., 60.
71. On Stevens's musical preferences, see Michael O. Stegman, "Wallace Stevens and Music: A Discography of Stevens' Phonograph Record Collection."
72. Zukofsky quoted in Carpenter, 257. For the subsequent biographical material, see Schafer's "Preface" and commentary throughout *Ezra Pound and Music*, as well as Antheil's autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music*. The following biographical sketch of Antheil is compiled from those sources.
73. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 245. Thanks to Ed Johnson for alerting me to the contemporary "reconstruction" of Antheil's original intentions for Ballet Mécanique, available for viewing at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eo0H8ztju78.
74. George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music*, 120.
75. The piece is reprinted in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 513–16. The quotation re: Picasso and Stravinsky is from page 514.
76. Antheil, *Why a Poet Quit the Muses*, 516.
77. Pound quoted in Larry Lyall, "Pound/Villon: *Le Testament de François Villon*," 20. Again, Pound's mix of "durable but permutable" seems to me to suggest a potentially different worldview than the racialized, essentialized rhythmic sense which Golston details in *Rhythm and Race*. In the end, Pound is a combination of both perspectives.
78. Charles Shere, "Eastbay Artists Score Record Triumph," 7.

79. Ibid., 8.
80. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 87.
81. See Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 1209.
82. See Kenner, *The Pound Era*, for various anecdotes of Pound's relationship to place, space, and time; especially the chapter entitled "The Sacred Places."
83. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 109.
84. Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 60.
85. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 278.
86. See n. 18 above.
87. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 107.
88. This poem is excerpted in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 37.
89. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 126.
90. See n. 16 and 17 above.
91. Reprinted in *Ezra Pound Speaking: Radio Speeches of World War II*, Leonard W. Doob, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).
92. See E. P. Walkiewicz and Hugh Witemeyer, "Ezra Pound's Contributions to New Mexican Periodicals and His Relationship to Senator Bronson Cutting."
93. Lewis quoted in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 53.
94. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 153–4.
95. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 297. Pound may have learned something of "raga" and "tala"—the melodic and rhythmic elements, respectively, of Hindustani music—from his association with Rabindranath Tagore, whom he had met in 1912. Tagore was, for a time, one of Pound's primary examples of the poet-singer that Pound himself wished he could become. Pound's interest in the concepts of Hindustani music are quite sophisticated for a Westerner, although elsewhere he mixes up "raga" and "tala" and seems to not recognize the full potential of improvisation in the music. See *Ezra Pound and Music*, 34–5, 256.
96. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 302.
97. *Poems and Translations*, 193–4.
98. Aldon Nielsen, "Ezra Pound and 'The Best-Known Colored Man in the United States,'" 151. While Nielsen is less sympathetic to Pound's interest in African and African American culture, I have nevertheless learned much from Nielsen's ability to carefully judge the many complicated aesthetic and ethical histories of twentieth-century literature. I view him as a poet and scholar who has learned much from Pound's mistakes and successes alike, and I thank him for teaching me to read carefully.
99. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 544.
100. James Laughlin, *Pound as Wuz*, 7. Noting the similarities between the themes and variations of jazz improvisation and the poetry of the Beats, Daniel Belgrad states: "This is the same structure that Ezra Pound termed 'ideogrammatic' and that he used to structure his *Cantos*, each new canto modifying the meaning of the whole series. Kerouac used it in *Mexico City Blues*, self-consciously comparing his choruses to Pound's *Cantos* in the 75th Chorus. (But "Cantos oughta sing," Kerouac insisted)." Belgrad, *Culture of Spontaneity*, 216).
101. See Truman Capote, *Conversations*, M. Thomas Inge, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 299.
102. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 111–13.

103. Laughlin, *Pound as Wuz*, 107.
104. Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 388.
105. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 3.
106. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 390.
107. Quoted in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 313.
108. A modern recording of the piece makes these statements patently clear; found at http://artofthestates.org/cgi-bin/piece.pl?pid=326. Antheil's description can be found at http://artofthestates.org/cgi-bin/piece.pl?pid=326.
109. Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life*, 51.
110. George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music*, 10.
111. Quoted in *Ezra Pound and Music*, 246.
112. Cecil Taylor quoted in Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life*, 50.
113. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 265. Another sample of this style piano playing can be found in Antheil's 1925 work, *A Jazz Symphony*, scored for an orchestra including: piano soloist; banjo; and multiple percussion, including gongs, drums, cymbals, wood blocks, and xylophones. A title like "Jazz Symphony" demonstrates that it is no coincidence that Antheil's playing technique is analogous to Afrodiasporic playing techniques and timbres, and it was the sound of drums and the rhythmic complexity of drumming in African and African American music that inspired Antheil throughout the 1920s and 30s. To hear and read more about *A Jazz Symphony*, see the liner notes and recording *New World Jazz*, The New World Symphony dir. Michael Tilson Thomas, compact disc, RCA Victor, 1998.
114. Francis Davis, "The Cantos of Cecil Taylor," 45.
115. Williams is quoted in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 60.
116. Selections of *Le Testament* are available on the recording *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae: The Music of Ezra Pound*. The score for the opera has been published by Margaret Fisher and Robert Hughes, *Le Testamant*, with and Introduction by R. Murray Schafer (Second Evening Art Publishing, 2008).
117. "Preface," *Ezra Pound and Music*, 13.
118. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 284.
119. Ibid., 264.
120. Antheil, "Why a Poet Quit the Muses," *Ezra Pound and Music*, 516.
121. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 270.
122. Donald Hall recounts this story in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 563.
123. The recording is available at http://media.sas. upenn.edu/pennsound /authors/ Pound/1939/Pound- Ezra 01_Sestina-Altaforte_ Harvard_1939.mp3.
124. *Ezra Pound and Music*, 292.
125. Just how much did Pound know about the jazz of his time? John Szwed has told me that there is a rumor about Pound corresponding with Duke Ellington, but I have not been able to locate these letters at the time of this writing. Szwed informed me of this at the Society of Ethnomusicology meeting at Wesleyan University, October 28, 2008.
126. Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 470.
127. Ibid., 471.
128. Ibid., 470–1.
129. Frobenius quoted in Robert J. Welke, "Frobenius:Pound—Some Quick Notes," 415. Note that my point here is not to critique or assess the validity of Frobenius's scientific or philosophical theories, but rather to provide a context for Pound's

enthusiasm for them. It should be noted that the poets of the Négritude movement were also interested in Frobenius; see Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism, 94*.

130. Welke, "Frobenius: Pound," 415.
131. Ibid., 415–16.
132. Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur, 57–8.
133. Nielsen, "Ezra Pound and 'The Best-Known Colored Man in the United States,' " 151.
134. North, The Dialect of Modernism, 78.
135. Thanks to Jane Marcus for exposing me to this amazing volume back when I was a Master's student at CCNY. And thanks to the good folks at Continuum for reprinting the abridged version.
136. Pound's letter is excerpted in Negro, 97; the full correspondence between Pound and Hughes, including this letter, can be found in Michael Coyle, ed., Ezra Pound and African American Modernism, 207–42. The correspondence was edited and annotated for that volume by David Roessel.
137. See Walkiewicz and Witemeyer, "Ezra Pound's Contributions to New Mexican Periodicals and His Relationship to Senator Bronson Cutting."
138. Pound states this in a brief biographical summary prefacing his Selected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1957), viii.
139. Walkiewicz and Witemeyer, 445.
140. Pound quoted in Walkiewicz and Witemeyer, 445.
141. See Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902–1941: I, Too Sing America, Chapter 10.
142. Information on Cunard can be found i*n Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty, 272–82*.
143. Pound, "Leo Frobenius," 393.
144. Langston Hughes, "A Letter to Ezra Pound," 97.
145. North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 94.
146. Frobenius quoted in Pound, "Leo Frobenius," 394.
147. Ibid.
148. Ibid.
149. See Charley Gerard, *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community.*
150. North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 97.
151. Again, I am pursuing a somewhat different reading of Pound's rhythmic journeys here—Michael Golston argues that the underlying musical and rhythmic structure of the *Cantos* are in fact in line with Pound's totalitarian leanings. Golston's argument is compelling, but I still believe that there is an unruly, potentially liberatory center to Pound's poetics which often counteracts and contradicts Fascist closure. See Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*.
152. Adorno's writing on jazz can be found in Theodor W. Adorno, E*ssays on Music*, Selected, with an Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Richard Leppert, Susan H. Gillepsie, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For two idiosyncratic and provocative books that draw on Adorno and other Frankfurt School and subsequent leftist cultural theorists, see Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, and Mike Heffley, *Northern Sun, Southern Moon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

153. George Antheil, "The Negro on the Spiral *or* A Method of Negro Music," 219.
154. Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music*, 122–3.
155. Ibid., 126.
156. See *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*, Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen J. Adams, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 239. For Pound's account of his time in Tangier and his impressions of Arab music, see *Ezra Pound and Music*, 223–4.
157. Antheil, "The Negro on the Spiral," 218.
158. Daniel Albright, *Modernism and Music*, 390.

Chapter 2

1. Amiri Baraka, "Introduction" to Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, i.
2. As I worked on this project the interest in Hughes's musical life seemed to increase; I am grateful to Gabriele Hayden, for example, for her forthcoming work on Hughes and for her comments on parts of this material, and to William Mohr for emphasizing the importance of Hughes in his paper "'Them Thoughts Would Bust My Head': The Mind's Ear of Modernism and the Social Prosody of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*" (Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Chicago, IL, December 28, 2007).
3. For Rampersad's account of this attitude and his reaction to Bloom, see Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I, 1902–1941: I, Too Sing America, 405, and The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II, 1941–1967: I Dream A World*, 435. Hereafter referred to as *Life 1* and *Life 2*, respectively.
4. James Anderson Winn's book, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) is excellent in many ways but nevertheless represents this sort of scholarship. This is problematic mainly in that it still represents the only single-volume work surveying poetry and music from a broad historical perspective—including modernism—even though it was published almost 30 years ago. Thankfully, more recent studies of modernist music and literature have been welcoming to diverse group of artists and cultures; see, for example, Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, and David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*; again, I am thinking here of scholarship that discusses both literature and music, black and white—there many studies which focus on relevant examples in isolation, but sustained studies are still the exception to the norm.
5. Baraka, "Introduction" to Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, iii.
6. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 228.
7. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 9*, 36.
8. *Hughes's Dream Harlem*, VHS, directed by Jamal Joseph (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2002).
9. Duke Ellington, "We, Too, Sing America," from *The Duke Ellington Reader,* Mark Tucker, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 147.
10. "The Glory of Negro History," The Langston Hughes Reader, 465–6. Recorded version on *The Glory of Negro History* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways

Records FW07752, 1955). The complete Smithsonian Folkways catalogue is available in digital form, either as downloads or on compact disc. Hughes recorded many albums for the label, and his poetry was also read by others for the label. See h ttp://www.folkways.si.edu/searchresults.aspx?sPhrase=langston%20hughes &sType=%27phrase%27.

11. Aldon Nielsen, *Integral Music*, 143.
12. Ibid., 147.
13. From Kerry's "Preface" in Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again and Other Poems*, iii.
14. Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 37.
15. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, 145.
16. Eric Prieto, "Ethnography, Improvisation, and the Archimedean Fulcrum: Michel Leiris and Jazz," 12.
17. Pound quoted in Michael Coyle, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, 240. The cover of this book, incidentally, bears a picture not of Pound but of Hughes.
18. Biographical material on Hughes in this chapter is culled primarily from his two autobiographies—*The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*—and Rampersad's two volume biography. And while Rampersad reminds us that Hughes was not always completely honest with his facts, I believe it is important to use his own depiction of his life in my discussion of Hughes and improvisation. Here I follow Ajay Heble's analysis of autobiography as an important locus of literary improvisation. See Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 89–116.
19. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 13–14.
20. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 325.
21. Ibid., 11.
22. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 99.
23. Kun, *Audiotopia*, 146–7.
24. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 73.
25. Paul Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*, xxi.
26. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Hughes's poetry refers, by page number, to *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Ampersad, ed.
27. Austerlitz riffs on this phrase, itself a riff on Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism," throughout *Jazz Consciousness*. See Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).
28. Hughes, *Rhythms of the World (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Records FW07340, 1955)*.
29. Milford Graves quoted in Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*, 174.
30. Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*, xiii.
31. William James quoted in Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 118.
32. Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 224.
33. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*, 312.
34. Ibid., 319.
35. For a succinct view of this definition of improvisation, see Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process."
36. Ralph Ellison, "Introduction" to *Invisible Man*, xxii.
37. Gunn, "America's Gods," 20–1.

38. *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper*.
39. Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*, 25, 30.
40. Kun, *Audiotopia*, 183.
41. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 31.
42. Ibid., 22.
43. Rampersad, *Life 1*.
44. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 255.
45. Ibid., 39.
46. Ibid., 26.
47. Ibid., 25.
48. Kun, 161.
49. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 332.
50. Ibid., 332.
51. Ibid., 150.
52. James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American."
53. Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 122.
54. Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*, 20.
55. Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, 20,23.
56. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 122.
57. *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper*.
58. Randy Weston quoted in Rampersad, *Life 2*, 327.
59. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 24. For Rampersad's discussion of this episode, see Rampersad, *Life 1*, 24.
60. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 34.
61. Ibid., 56.
62. Rampersad, *Life 1*, 39–40, and Kun, *Audiotopia*, 148–55.
63. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 92.
64. Ibid., 91.
65. Pastras, *A Clear Field*, 14.
66. Eric Hobsbawm writing as "Francis Newton," *The Jazz Scene*, 149–50. As Ajay Heble has noted, Hobsbawm's original reticence to reveal himself as a jazz critic is emblematic of the negative connotations that jazz has had historically. See Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 16–19.
67. Ibid., 160.
68. A short list would include: Amiri Baraka, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Ralph Ellison, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Langston Hughes, Albert Murray, Robert O'Meally, Robert Palmer, and Clyde Woods, among others.
69. For a contemporary version of this origin-myth of jazz via the blues, with comments from Marsalis, et al., see Ken Burns, dir. *Jazz*, Episode 1: Gumbo (Washington, D.C.: Florentine Films, 2000). I look forward to Allen Lowe's forthcoming blues recording compilation and book, challenging some of the received wisdom on these histories.
70. I'd like to thank Bob O'Meally for pointing out the ways in which Sterling Brown's blues writing may be, in fact, more significant and sophisticated than that of Hughes. I'd also like to thank Bob for frequently stomping my own blues away.
71. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 214–15.

72. Rampersad, *Life 1*, 16–17.
73. Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 430–1.
74. Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, 8.
75. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 77.
76. Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, 241.
77. Ibid., 266–7.
78. Hughes, *The Langston Hughes Reader*, 160.
79. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 209.
80. Larry Scanlon, "'Death is a Drum': Rhythm, Modernity, and the Negro Poet Laureate," 533.
81. McKay's sonnet, *If We Must Die*, was quoted by Winston Churchill as part of a speech rallying for U.S. support of Britain during World War Two. See Richard Lederer, "The Didactic and the Literary in Four Harlem Renaissance Sonnets," Gary D. Wintz, ed. *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920–1940: Analysis and Assessment, 1940–1979* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 357.
82. Rampersad, *Life 1*, 72.
83. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 3.
84. Rampersad, *Life 1*, 72.
85. Scanlon, "'Death is a Drum,'" 531.
86. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 9.
87. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 225, Craig Werner, "Blues for T. S. Eliot and Langston Hughes: The Afro-Modernist Aesthetic of Harlem Gallery," 456.
88. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 225.
89. Ibid., 227–36.
90. Scanlon, "'Death is a Drum,'" 528.
91. From the Pound/Hughes correspondence is excerpted in Coyle, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, 233.
92. Aldon Nielsen, *Reading Race in American Poetry: "An Area of Act*," 30.
93. Coyle, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, 221.
94. For a more critical discussion of this exchange, see Jonathan Gill, "Ezra Pond and Langston Hughes: The ABC of Po'try," 79–88.
95. Burton Hatlen, "EP, *New Masses*, and the Cultural Politics of Race," 177.
96. Coyle, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, 231–2.
97. Ibid., 232.
98. On Beatniks and the Cold War, see Lewis MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool: Beat, BeBop, and the American Avant-Garde*, 13–14.
99. Coyle, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, 214.
100. Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 287.
101. See Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), for a discussion of the differences between modernist mourning, vs. melancholic, reactions to capitalist life. Moglen argues that Hughes was part of a group of writers who offered hope in the face of despair posed by many of the so-called "High Modernists." Such hope is another example of Hughes's improvisational, blues-based ideology where even sad songs (or poems) can be potentially positive personal and social transformations. Thanks to George Lipsitz for bringing this work to my attention.
102. While I focus mainly on the *Weary Blues* recording session, Josh Kun has detailed important dimensions of Hughes's musical affiliations, including the various

musical settings of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and Hughes's performance poem, *Ask Your Mama*. See Kun, *Audiotopia*.

103. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 255–6. Bob O'Meally has also emphasized to me that Hughes was a furious typist, working on multiple typewriters on multiple poems. The percussive power of the typewriter has been exploited by musicians and composers: two examples include Leroy Anderson's *The Typewriter* and Steve Reich's *Typing Music*.
104. Rampersad, *Life 2*, 151.
105. See *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 672–6.
106. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 177.
107. John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (Impulse Records, 1995, GRD 155; originally released 1964). Coltrane was famously reticent about describing his music in ways that would essentialize or foreclose possible interpretations, especially in relation to politics. See Frank Kofsky's interview regarding these topics in Coltrane in Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s: Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 1998). Coltrane's poem and title of *Psalm* do clearly put the music into a spiritual context, but again, the direct semantic content is not present in the music itself, which uses only instruments and no voice (whereas the opening portion of *A Love Supreme* does use vocals).
108. David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*, 115–16. *Weary Blues* has been reissued on compact disc, but the original track listings are frustratingly not marked digitally on the reissue; however, this makes the long suite of poems blend together in a way that was perhaps more akin to the kinds of live performances that Hughes was engaged in when he "toured" the album. See Langston Hughes with Charles Mingus and Leonard Feather, *Weary Blues*.
109. Ibid., 116–17.
110. Ibid., 124.
111. *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper*.
112. Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 115–16; Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 187–8.
113. *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper*. It should be noted, however, that the recording of *Weary Blues* itself, as well as the subsequent "Poetry to Jazz" performances that Hughes performed, are themselves are reshufflings of other texts which themselves engage in the improvisational dynamics I have been outlining throughout this chapter. Evidence of this can be found in typescripts in the Hughes papers housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
114. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 296.
115. Cullen, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 661–2.
116. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 178.
117. For my discussion of Pastras's three categories of improvisation in literature, see Chapter One. Thanks to Arden Reed and George Lipsitz for helping me clarify my arguments regarding Hughes's performances. The *Weary Blues* recording was recreated live in Washington, D.C. in February, 2009 by the group Washington Musica Viva. Video excerpts are available at http://dcmusicaviva.blogspot.com/2009/05/ holly-and-band-from-show-at-busboys-and.html. The organizers/performers debate the aesthetic value of the Hughes performances on the Poetry Foundation's podcasted show, "Poetry Off the Shelf," available at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/audioitem.html?id=713. Also note that the venue

where these performances occurred, Bus Boys and Poets, was named in honor of Hughes (who worked as both a bus boy and a poet in Washington, D.C.).
118. George Lipsitz, Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music, 34.
119. Milton Bass, "Jazz With Poetry." This quotation and the other information in this paragraph dealing with Hughes's performances can be found in Reel 4 of the Hughes papers in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
120. Rampersad, *Life 2*, 315.
121. Ibid., 424–5. For Hughes's work with Weston, see the compact disc reissues available as *Mosaic Select: Randy Weston* (Mosaic Records MS-004, 2003). This set includes *Uhuru Afrika!* as well as liner notes written by Hughes for other Weston albums. Weston himself will surely have much to say about Hughes in his forthcoming autobiography, *African Rhythms*, to be published in 2010 by Duke University Press.
122. See Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere*, 1–42.
123. See, Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, Trans. Giacomo Donis, eds. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001). Derrida was known for his love of jazz—I was fortunate to be in a jazz group that played for him shortly before he died, although I never got the opportunity to ask him what he thought of our improvisations or those yet to come . . .
124. Fischlin and Heble, 10.
125. See Hebdige, "Even Unto Death: Improvisation, Edging, and Enframement," Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), and George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994).
126. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 32–3.
127. Ibid., 46.
128. Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 400–1.
129. David Yaffe also riffs on this title in his *Fascinating Rhythm*.
130. Oliver Nelson, liner notes, *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*, 8.
131. See Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).
132. *Hughes' Dream Harlem*.
133. For a view on this concept in relation to gender in jazz, see Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
134. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 400–1.

Chapter 3

1. My epigraph is quoted in Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism*, 20. It is from a review of Stein's work, "Charleston, Hey! Hey!" from *The Nation & Athenaeum* 40.17 (29 January 1927): 595. While preparing this manuscript I coincidentally encountered it again in James Donald's article, "Jazz Modernism and Film Art:

Dudley Murphey and Ballet mécanique" from *Modernism and Modernity* 16:1 (2009) 25–49. His piece is a well-articulated study of the cultural contexts of jazz and literary/cinematic modernism which are still drastically under-acknowledged and misunderstood. I hope that this chapter on Stein, sound, and improvisation furthers our understanding of what Donald describes as "the recognition that certain 'jazz' principles and techniques are discernible in the works of other contemporary, modernist artists"—that is, artists not usually associated with jazz aesthetics. See Donald, 25.

2. Available as a sound file on the Ubu Web site, http: //www.ubu.com /sound /stein. html.
3. Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903–1932*, 507.
4. Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 18, 34.
5. Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, 9.
6. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, 193.
7. Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater*, 74–76.
8. Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises 1923–1934*, 22.
9. Quoted in Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 102–3.
10. Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 338.
11. I should again note, however, that while the most important aspect of improvisational aesthetics in American culture stems from African American cultural forms such as jazz music, my work on improvisation emphasizes additional sources of improvisational practice and theory crucial to modernist writing. Indeed, it is the interplay between openly improvisational forms such as jazz and practices not usually described as improvisation which interest me; Improvisation thus joins related terms (in some cases, terms that are in fact sub-species of improvisation) like automatic writing, indeterminacy, aleatory writing, etc. as an important modernist literary technique.
12. Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, 9.
13. Quoted in Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 61.
14. Ibid., 61.
15. Ibid., 61.
16. Quoted in James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company*, 30.
17. Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 79.
18. Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 162.
19. Giles Gunn, "Introduction," *William James, Pragmatism and Other Writings*, vii–xxxii.
20. Ibid., xxviii.
21. Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings*, 255–6.
22. Malcolm, *Gertrude and Alice*, 12.
23. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 506.
24. Malcolm, *Gertrude and Alice*, 173.
25. Dydo, *The Language That Rises*, 17.
26. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 508.
27. Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody who was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein*, 5.
28. Quoted in Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 86.
29. Greg Downey, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*, 27.

30. H. Porter Abbott, "Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects: Abandoning Representation in Literature and Film." This essay is now found in Frederick Luis Aldama, ed, Toward a Theory of Narrative Acts (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), however, I am quoting from an earlier draft.
31. Ibid., 2.
32. William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 172.
33. Dydo, *The Language That Rises*, 17.
34. William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," 174.
35. Ibid., 175.
36. Ibid., 177.
37. Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 107.
38. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 508.
39. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 119.
40. Mellow, *Charmed Circle*, 147.
41. Ibid., 146.
42. North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 61.
43. Ibid., 61.
44. Aldon Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality*, 6.
45. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 168.
46. Ibid., 210.
47. Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 97.
48. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 201.
49. Ibid., 124.
50. Ibid., 219.
51. Ibid., 238.
52. Quoted in Stein, *Selected Writings*, 338.
53. M. Lynn Weiss, *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism*, 18.
54. Quoted in Stein, *Selected Writings*, 338.
55. Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines*, 7.
56. Nielsen, *Integral Music*, 159.
57. Quoted in Weiss, *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright*, 9.
58. See Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," 144–166.
59. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 723.
60. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 5.
61. Abbott, "Garden Paths," 12.
62. Ibid., 7.
63. Quoted in Stein, *Selected Writings*, 460.
64. Throughout *The Language That Rises*, Dydo painstakingly reconstructs Stein's writing process, demonstrating how Stein's "final" manuscripts were a complex mix of near-automatic writing, daily writing exercises designed to free her from linguistic norms, and the typing/publishing changes made by various editors (beginning with Alice Toklas, who initially typed many of the pieces). Again, Philip Pastras notes that these types of writing could all be considered improvisatory. See my Introduction for a discussion of Pastras's terminology.
65. Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1932–1946*, 14.
66. Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 322.

67. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 659.
68. Mellow, *Charmed Circle*, 26.
69. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 319.
70. See Porter Abbott, "Garden Paths."
71. Stein, *Selected Writings*, 460.
72. James, "The Stream of Consciousness," *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 173–4.
73. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 331.
74. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 72.
75. Quoted in Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, 16.
76. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 355.
77. Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 315.
78. Quoted in Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, 38–9. A fine version of *Four Saints* is available on compact disc: *Four Saints in Three Acts*, music by Virgil Thomson, Orchestra of Our Time, Joel Thome, conductor, (Elektra Nonesuch, 1982). The original cast recording of Four Saints is not commercially available, but I thank Bahram Osqueezadeh and the UCSB Davidson Library Special Collections for assistance in allowing me access to the abridged original cast studio recordings, conducted by Virgil Thomson: *Four Saints in Three Acts*, original cast recording with abridgments made by the composer, music by Virgil Thomson, 78 recording, RCA, 1940.
79. Ibid., 200.
80. Ibid., 202–5.
81. Quoted in Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, 245.
82. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 608.
83. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 179.
84. Stein, *Writings 1903–32*, 650.
85. See liner notes for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, music by Virgil Thomson, Orchestra of Our Time, Joel Thome, conductor, (Elektra Nonesuch, 1982).
86. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 181.
87. Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*, 154.
88. Quoted in Watson, 200.
89. Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 217.
90. Ibid., 218.
91. This track can be found on the compact disc included with Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, *Rhythm Science* (Boston: Mediawork, 2004).

Chapter 4

1. Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," 111.
2. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 69. All subsequent references to Stevens's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, refer to this volume, by page number.
3. See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*.
4. Gunn, *Beyond Solidarity: Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World*, 124.
5. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 221–2.
6. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens—A Biography: The Later Years, 1923–1955*, hereafter referred to as *Later Years*, 412.

7. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 665.
8. Michael O. Stegman, "Wallace Stevens and Music: A Discography of Stevens' Phonograph Record Collection," 79.
9. Ibid., 79–97.
10. John Hollander, "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," 142.
11. Ibid., 133.
12. For early critical reactions, see Charles Doyle, ed., *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*.
13. For information on the Indian-style harmonium, see Matthew Rahaim's forthcoming article, "That Ban(e) of Indian Music: Nation, Intonation, and the Harmonium."
14. Hollander, "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," 133.
15. Albert Cook, "The French Mutations of Wallace Stevens," 25.
16. Anca Rosu, *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*, 42.
17. Robert M. Crunden, *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism*, 358.
18. Eric Prieto, *Listening In*, 1–57.
19. Ibid., 26.
20. Again, for a concise summary of these issues, see Prieto, *Listening In*, 1–57.
21. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 910, 914.
22. Barbara Holmes, *The Decomposer's Art: Ideas of Music in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 7.
23. Stevens, *Letters*, 136.
24. Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500–1700*, 8.
25. Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, 219–20.
26. See Barbara Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous*. Fisher was longtime friends with Stevens's daughter, Holly; I thank her for showing me much about Stevens and his world.
27. Michael Faherty, "Kandinsky at the Klavier: Stevens and the Musical Theory Wassily Kandinsky," 155–6.
28. See Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 270 n. 59. For a discussion of Williams and improvisation, see Pastras, *A Clear Field*.
29. Kandinsky quoted in Faherty, "Kandinsky at the Klavier," 155.
30. Ibid., 157.
31. Coleridge, 28–9. This reading of *Peter Quince* and some of the other ideas in this chapter are based on material from my Master's Thesis; see Wallace, *Capturing the Music of Ideas in Black Ink: Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Music*.
32. John Cage, *Silence*, 8.
33. William Fitzgerald, "'Music is feeling then, not sound': Wallace Stevens and the Body of Music," 49.
34. Stevens's readings are available on *Wallace Stevens Reads*, compact disc and book, with commentary by J.D. McClatchy.
35. Quoted in McClatchy, "Wallace Stevens," 12.
36. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: A Modern Anthology*, 251.
37. Cage, *Silence*, 3.
38. Ibid., 12.
39. Ibid.
40. Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, 181–223.
41. Ibid., 211.

42. Theodore Sampson, *A Cure of the Mind: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, 134.
43. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, excerpts from *Evangeline*, 393. Thanks to Porter Abbott for pointing out this link.
44. Richardson, *Later Years*, 426.
45. Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, 42.
46. Rob Wallace, *Capturing the Music of Ideas in Black Ink*, 24.
47. Hollander, "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," 143.
48. Ibid.
49. Quoted in Doyle, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, 70–1.
50. Ibid., 71.
51. Ciardi quoted in Doyle, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, 399.
52. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, 11.
53. Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," 111–12.
54. The reading can be found on *Wallace Stevens Reads*.
55. The Fred Hersch recording is from an album called *Thirteen Ways* (GM Recordings 3033, 1995); for a list of settings of Stevens's poetry, see Holmes, *The Decomposer's Art*.
56. Eighth Blackbird's website is: http://www.eighthblackbird.com/about.
57. Pound, "Vorticism," 200.
58. William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," 184.
59. Ibid., 178.
60. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, 211.
61. Ibid., 209.
62. Mort Dixon, lyrics to *Bye Bye Blackbird*, 36.
63. John Lennon and Paul McCartney, *Blackbird*, The Beatles, *The White Album* (Capitol Records, CDP 7 46443 2,1968).
64. William James, *Writings*, *1902–1910*, 899.
65. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens—A Biography: The Early Years, 1879–1923*, 174. Hereafter cited as *Early Years*.
66. Ibid., 173.
67. Ibid., 174; on the relationship between the poems and walking, 22.
68. Richardson, *Later Years*, 301–2.
69. Richardson, *Early Years*, 175.
70. See Frank O'Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency* (New York: Grove Press, 1957).
71. Richardson, *Early Years*, 509.
72. Alex Ross, "Invisible Priest," *Slate* (January 8, 1998), available at http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/more_to_come.html.
73. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, 210.
74. See Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981) 233.
75. Perloff quoted in Lee Margaret Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, 79–83.
76. Ibid., 82–3.
77. On the discipline of Sun Ra, see John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998). Sun Ra was also a poet, and his word-worlds and soundscapes are sometimes strangely similar to those of Stevens. Both artists were interested in the possibilities of traveling between imagination and reality, and both were highly musical in their own way.
78. Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*,168.

79. Stevens quoted in Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, 78.
80. Ibid., 78.
81. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, 210.
82. Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," 112.
83. Robert Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City: The Literature, Art, Jazz, and Architecture of and Emerging Global Capital*, 3–8.
84. See Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 125–30.
85. Feinstein and Komunyakaa, *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, 282.
86. See Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 125–30 for a lucid reading of Stevens's racism in relation to other modernist musicians and poets. I am indebted to David for his long-standing encouragement in all my jazz-literature undertakings.
87. Stegman, "Wallace Stevens and Music," 79–97.
88. For details on these trips, see, Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, 100–1.
89. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902–1941—I, Too Sing America*, 150–1.
90. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'Darken Your Speech': Racialized Cultural Work of Modernist Poets," 43–62.
91. Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 129–30.
92. Richardson, *Early Years*, 113.
93. Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, 62.
94. Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 130. Yaffe is referring to Stevens's reaction to Gwendolyn Brooks being a judge of the National Book Award contest, but we can also read a more general sense of "judgment" into the statement.
95. Ibid., 130.

Conclusion

1. Bob Dylan, *Desolation Row*, lyrics available at the official Dylan website, *http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/desolation-row*. For more about the Modernist Titanic and whose side Dylan is on, see Dylanologist Christopher Ricks's Dylan's *Visions of Sin* (New York: Ecco, 2004, 28–30).
2. Carpenter, 897. This was the visit where Pound supposedly admitted to Ginsberg that his anti-Semitism was a mistake.
3. *Warning*, from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 393.
4. Drummer Eddie *Prévost* notes in *No Sound Is Innocent* that his improvising ensemble, AMM, was inspired by Pound's interest in Chinese ideograms. *No Sound is Innocent* (Matching Tye, near Harlow, England: Copula, 1995).
5. Mike Benveniste, unpublished paper, 2006, 20.
6. Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 237.
7. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 222.
8. On ethical quarrels (the phrase is Wayne Booth's) and their role in improvisational ethics, see Heble, *Landing on the Wrong* Note, 199–228.
9. Quoted in Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 208.

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—"The Negro on the Spiral or a Method of Negro Music." Cunard 214–19.

—"Why a Poet Quit the Muses." Pound, *Ezra Pound and Music*, 513–16.

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